



My
Friend's

vol. **8**

Little
Sister

Has It
IN
for
Me!

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari





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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

Characters



Kohinata Iroha

First year. Plays a polite honor student at school, but is annoying to Akiteru. A talented actress. A cheerful girl who would like to vacation at a tropical island resort.



Kohinata Ozuma

Second year. Nicknamed Ozu. Akiteru's only friend, and the programmer of the 05th Floor Alliance. He's satisfied staying home and looking up travel destinations on Google Earth, rather than actually going there.



Otoi [redacted]

Second year. Her given name is private. She's a sound engineer who helps out the 05th Floor Alliance. She prefers her own company and would rather travel by herself so she can take her time and do her own thing.



Tomosaka Sasara

First year. Iroha's former rival, the two are now friends. To her, vacation is a time to spend taking aesthetic photos to get the most likes possible.



Ooboshi Akiteru

Second year. The protagonist and the 05th Floor Alliance's producer. Values efficiency above all else. Even on a trip, he'll put together a highly detailed plan to keep his travel time as low as possible.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's cousin and fake girlfriend. Currently working hard to earn his affection. She is secretly the author Makigai Namako. A top interest for her when traveling is eating the locally-caught fish.



Kageishi Sumire

Both Akiteru's homeroom teacher and the talented artist Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. A twenty-five-year-old who loves alcohol, she would love to go on a sake brewery tour and sample all the offerings until she was drowning in the stuff.



Kageishi Midori

Second year. A phenomenal honor student who gets full marks in every subject, every time. Though her acting skills suck, she's head of the drama club. Once went on vacation to Atami, where she learned about the city's adult museum and promptly passed out.



Kiraboshi Kanaria

Makigai Namako's editor, who brings her idol talents to the job. Claims she is seventeen, and chirps at the end of her sentences. Even on vacation, she'll read any work emails she gets right away.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. My name is Ooboshi Akiteru, and recently I found my path blocked by two moms.

The first was my friend's little sister's mom: Kohinata Otoha, or Amachi Otoha, as she is known in her role as CEO of Tenchido. The other one was my fake girlfriend's mom: major actress Tsukinomori Mizuki, wife to the CEO of Honeyplace Works.

The turbulent rampage of these eccentric moms threatened to upend everything, from the structure of the 05th Floor Alliance to my romantic affairs. Throughout it all was the threat of the gaming industry's trends: namely, the relative success of Honeyplace Works' console games, and a push for games to appeal to a broader audience. Knowing our download count for *Koyagi: When They Cry* wasn't competitive enough, I roused my team members to do whatever we could to make that number soar.

It was a mistake.

Enthused by my determination, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei (aka Kageishi Sumire), who was already taking on an extra workload at school due to her involvement in planning the upcoming field trip, pushed herself to complete her illustration work for *Koyagi*, and ended up injuring herself. It was neither her fault for failing to take care of her health, nor Mashiro's for passing on how passionate I was about this whole thing.

All of it was *my* fault. Because I had neglected every aspect of my private life to pour everything I had into the game, my Alliance mates had matched my devotion, and ultimately they pushed themselves beyond their limits.

That wasn't to say I forced them to do it; I knew that they worked on *Koyagi* because they genuinely wanted to. But as their producer, it was my job to place limits on their enthusiasm, and I'd failed to do that. So I came to a decision that would allow us to continue working on our game without changing the structure of our team.

The development team was going on a break, and for a while there would be no updates to *Koyagi*. So far, we had worked without

rest, but that would change from now on. We would not go back to work until Sumire was free from her field trip responsibilities, and we had the time to put out updates for *Koyagi* at a sustainable pace again.

Of course I wasn't just going to sit around doing nothing. I was going to focus on my private life, for the sake of improving both the Alliance and *Koyagi*. I'd pledged that I was going to enjoy the upcoming field trip as best I could, just like any other student—though I did have one reservation about the whole thing:

My friend's little sister would not be joining us on the field trip.

Interlude: Midori and Otoi-san

He passed me in the corridor. When I turned around, I saw an unfamiliar boy talking animatedly with his friend. My frozen facial muscles relaxed in a second as though in disappointment, but then I allowed myself a sigh of relief.

It wasn't him after all.

I was relieved. Or was I disappointed? It was difficult to unravel my own emotions.

It was the period between classes and I, Kageishi Midori, was heading to one of the science labs for a chemistry lesson. I was somewhat surprised to find myself disgruntled at the prospect of being made to move classrooms; I had never been one for rebelling against a teacher's instruction. I followed every rule faithfully and to the letter, and I had never doubted them or felt they were particularly oppressive in any way. I had simply accepted them as part of how things were.

And yet here I was, feeling a spark of irritation over the minor inconvenience of traversing the corridor to go to a different classroom rather than being allowed to spend that time in the previous one. Rationally, I knew I could only blame myself.

"There I go again, mistaking some passerby for Ooboshi-kun..."

Even if I asked myself why, the answer would not be forthcoming. Both the contours of that boy's face *and* his outward appearance were a far cry from Ooboshi-kun. This wasn't even the first time. In fact, it had happened again and again recently.

For example, I felt that way when I caught a glimpse of someone as I put on my shoes at the lockers, and when I spotted a hint of someone passing by the classroom door.

As if that wasn't bad enough, it had even happened on my way home from cram school. Based on my location I *knew* that none of the strangers I passed would be Ooboshi-kun.

Still, my body and mind would react every single time, and I would feel my temperature rising.

What on earth was wrong with me?

"Don't tell me you're fallin' for Aki, Kageishi?"

I met the eyes of a female student slouching against the corridor wall. There was a lollipop stick in her mouth (which, I might add, was against school rules).

“There must be something wrong with me.” I sighed.

“Hey, I asked you a question.”

I treated that student as an apparition and attempted to pass her by, but she grabbed my shoulder and stopped me. Her long red hair was tied back with a hairband—but apart from that, it was not styled in any particular way.

This girl was Otoi-san.

She usually lacked energy and her movements always seemed twice as slow as anyone else’s, yet her grip was astonishingly strong. I couldn’t move a single step forward, as though I were shackled by a ball and chain.

I had no other choice but to turn around, although I made sure to show my displeasure on my face.

“Not even I’d reply to such a weird greeting.”

“Nothin’ weird about it. Just thought you were fallin’ for Aki or somethin’, and I’m pretty sure I’m right.”

“You’re imagining things, Otoi-san! Write me an essay if you really think you can prove your hypothesis. And I’d thank you not to announce such things so loudly. Somebody might get the wrong impression!”

“You’re bein’ a million times louder than me right now.”

“Th-That’s your fault, Otoi-san!” I grumbled.

This was incredibly vexing. Me, in love with Ooboshi-kun? That was just the most absurd thing ever. I’d never fallen in love even once during my entire life.

It wasn’t that I was bad at talking to guys, or that I thought they were all the same, it was just that I’d been president of several committees since elementary school and had to confiscate so many banned items from male classmates time after time, that I’d grown weary of their childish ways and lost all interest in that sort of thing, although I would always have been open to it if a mature, self-reliant guy like Ooboshi-kun came along, but this is just supposition, and I’m certainly not saying that I *am* interested in Ooboshi-kun!

“C’mon, don’t get all frosty with me. Ain’t we both on the field trip committee? Figured I could lend you my ear or somethin’.”

“That’s an outright lie. You’re just looking for some cheap entertainment!”

“Sure am. Don’tcha think mistaken’ every passin’ guy for Aki is hilarious?”

I started to growl at her, but stopped. It was only then that I realized how Otoi-san referred to Ooboshi-kun: as “Aki,” a nickname.

“Are you...especially close to Ooboshi-kun, Otoi-san?”

“What, you jealous?”

“N-No, that is *not* why I’m asking!”

“No?” Otoi-san’s eyes, listless as they were, seemed to scrutinize my very soul as she stared at me. Then, she let out a heavy sigh. “Seriously?”

“What? *What?* What are you reacting to, and why?!”

“Y’know what they say ‘bout grass bein’ greener?”

“On the other side of the fence?”

“Yeah, like when someone really wants somethin’, it’s harder for them to get, but then you get some random dude who’s already got it even though they don’t want it. Happens a lot with loot crates.”

“I am familiar with that idiom. What I don’t understand is why you’ve chosen to recite it to me all of a sudden!”

“Good question. Maybe you can use that big brain of yours to figure it out.” Otoi-san waved a lazy hand and began to walk in the opposite direction.

“Hey! Where are you going?” I cried after her.

Otoi-san turned around like it was a chore, and rearranged the angle of the lollipop stick in her mouth so it was pointing upwards. “You’d listen to me if you were ready to face your own emotions. I don’t have time to deal with folk who make up excuses all the time and walk ‘round with their eyes closed. I’ve already got a ton of other people who need counselin’...”

“What do you— Otoi-san! How can you move so fast?!”

“See ya.”

What with how lethargic she was when she spoke, I was incredulous at how swiftly Otoi-san disappeared down the other end of the corridor. I’d never seen her sprint since the moment we met, yet now she was walking as rapidly as though there were a moving walkway beneath her feet.

If there was one thing I’d learned recently, it was that Otoi-san could move surprisingly quickly when it came to running from something she considered too much effort. I’d wager she was the type to fully engage all of her physical and mental facets only when she wanted to get out of something.

I sighed. Only when Otoi-san was completely out of sight did her words resurface in my mind.

“Don’t tell me you’re fallin’ for Aki?”

Me? In love with *him*?

What a completely ridiculous assertion! He already had a girlfriend he held dear, Tsukinomori-san. If Otoi-san’s remark held *any* water, it would make me an unpleasant girl who yearned after other people’s boyfriends.

I’d lived my life thus far by following the Kageishi House’s rules, devoting myself daily to my studies, judging wickedness, and pursuing what was right. I was never under any illusion that it made me

special; I simply thought that leading a serious and honest life was common sense.

Supposing what Otoi-san said was true... Wouldn't that make me a despicable person?

"Ugh! I'm so *tired* of this! There *has* to be something wrong with me. Seriously wrong..."

I clutched at my tumultuous chest and walked down the corridor, face pointed towards the floor like a criminal being forced into a police car on their arrest. It might seem an odd analogy but the main point was that I really didn't want anybody seeing my face at the moment.

Just then, a poster on the wall caught my eye. A notice for the field trip, one I was involved in organizing myself as part of the committee.

Field trip.

Those two words were enough to bring Ooboshi-kun's face to mind once more.

Whatever was wrong with me, it was definitely chronic.

Prologue

My face had no standout features. My grades were neither outstanding nor terrible in any subject. I'd never been applauded at field day, never been the ace of any sports team, and I was mediocre at every art form. I let the mannequins at the stores dictate my fashion sense, and had no interest in making myself look good for the opposite sex.

Mediocre. Average. Mass-produced. Ask a hundred people who had left the smallest impression on them in their lives and I would definitely come first... Wait, actually, they shouldn't even remember me, so I wouldn't even come up as an answer.

Whatever, that's how you'd describe Ooboshi Akiteru (me), and that's the rundown of my high school stats. Even self-insert protagonists in high school dating sims were more interesting than me.

Bland, dull, and insignificant as I was, there was no way that anything special would happen to me during the major bittersweet event that every teenager looked forward to: the upcoming field trip. I wasn't sad about that—in fact, that was just how I wanted it to be.

I'd dedicated all my teenage years to making a game with the 05th Floor Alliance. We were still in high school, so if we wanted to make a splash in the industry, we needed to treat events like this as noise. That meant keeping a safe distance to avoid any undue influence, and letting them pass us by. Then we could efficiently dedicate our time to the essential things and reach our goal in the shortest time possible.

That was my philosophy...until recently.

It's kind of ironic, but after a lot of stuff happened, I started to think about reevaluating my attitude towards my private life. That was when I zeroed in on the field trip: a perfect opportunity to do just that. And now I was all about that trip.

It was the night before we were due to set off, and I couldn't sleep. Because I was too excited about tomorrow, right?

Wrong.

"Senpai, Senpai, look at this, Senpai! I finally took down this monster!"

I didn't respond.

It was late at night, and I was in my apartment. In the bedroom,

to be specific. The lights were out, leaving only a faint blue glow from a liquid crystal display. From my position lying on the bed, I could just about see that golden head of hair leaning against the bed frame. The merciless clicking of the controller as she pressed button after button seemed to bounce off the walls.

“It’s all about the throwing kunai and the barrel bombs these days! That’s what the *real* hunters use! Take that!”

I didn’t respond.

There was a character on the screen, digging through the corpse of the giant monster collapsed on the ground. It was the latest installment of the popular hunting game. The point was to team up with your friends and cooperate. This girl was playing alone.

“Whoa, this next boss is crazy strong! Hey, Senpai! Don’t sleep, Senpai. Help me out here!”

“Oh my *God*, you are so annoying! How much longer are you gonna hang around in my room?!”

I finally snapped.

I wouldn’t have cared if she kept playing by herself, but now she was trying to get me involved when I was clearly tucked up in bed.

“Uh... What’s with the shouting? You *do* realize what time it is, right?”

“I’m gonna hand that question right back to you. I’ll even wrap it up in a neat little package.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Senpai! These walls, they’re a hundred percent soundproof! I’m being *really* careful not to annoy anyone but you, so just relax, will you?”

“In that case, there’s nothing that stops me from shouting.”

“There is; it makes me jump. See, it’s all about being considerate of me when I’m trying to enjoy a nice video game.”

“So you can be loud, but I can’t? Whatever happened to gender equality? I thought society was getting better at it.”

“Men and women *are* equal, but you and I are totally different from most men and women! For us, common sense becomes common nonsense!”

“Speaking of nonsense...”

That girl currently rolling around on my floor in laughter was Kohinata Iroha. She was the little sister of my friend, Kohinata Ozuma, who lived in the apartment next door up here on the fifth floor. In other words, she was my friend’s little sister. She liked to treat my apartment as her second home, coming and going as she pleased, and she behaved outrageously to get on my nerves. Today, though, things were a little different.

“Why are you still here when it’s so late? Usually you’d be gone by now.”

“Mom’s not taken her eyes off me, so I haven’t been able to come by that much lately. I’ve been really hungry for you lately, Senpai. I’ve missed our flirting so much! Aaah, woe is me! Waaah!”

“You call that acting? I know you can put more emotion into it than that.”

“We’re not recording right now. You don’t have to direct me.”

“Ugh.”

She had a very valid point.

The waterworks may have been fake, but I could believe it when she said she hadn’t been allowed to enjoy herself for a while now. Her mom, Kohinata Otoha-san (or Amachi Otoha-san) was the very reason Iroha wasn’t allowed access to any form of entertainment.

Usually it didn’t matter so much, since Otoha-san was so busy with work she was barely home, but when she had a long vacation and was hanging around twenty-four seven (like recently), it was more difficult for Iroha to stop by my place and indulge in the entertainment she was denied. No wonder she was here now, playing through all the games she’d missed out on.

“It’s not like you’ve gotta rush through all of these tonight. You’re free to use my apartment while I’m away on the field trip.”

“Hmph. There’s no point.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not Senpai’s apartment without Senpai.”

“If you only come over to play games, it shouldn’t matter whether I’m here or not.”

Iroha let out an exaggerated sigh. “You don’t get it. You don’t *get it*, Senpai!” She thrust her finger towards me, like a prosecutor presenting a vital piece of evidence. “A movie is not the same when you watch it through a streaming service instead of at the theater! A concert is not the same when you watch it on TV instead of seeing it live! Coming to your room is not as fun if you’re not here to mess with! It just won’t feel *real*, teasing you from a distance.”

“Your examples are too detailed. It actually makes you look dumber.”

“I’m just *saying*, I need to charge myself up before you go off on your trip.”

“Jeez, why’s this been happening so much lately?”

By “this,” I meant having a girl in the same room with me late at night, before I went to bed. I bet if I complained about this to Ozu, he’d tease me for being “lucky.”

It was only recently that I had had another girl stay the night in my room, though. That girl being Tsukinomori Mashiro. I thought about her now. She was a childhood friend of mine, as cold as her skin was pale, and with a sharp tongue. She was also my cousin, and my

contractually obligated fake girlfriend. There were plenty of ways I could describe her relationship to me actually, but that just goes to show how deep it was.

Fake dating or not, she'd properly confessed to me a while back, and I knew she hadn't given up on me yet. It was careless of me to let her stay at my place overnight, given the circumstances. There was nothing to feel guilty about—we had only brainstormed ideas to fix the issue of temporarily losing Murasaki Shikibu-sensei—but I hadn't managed to fully explain that to her mother.

And now here I was at it again, almost right away. Clearly I hadn't learned my lesson.

"Wait, it's not like I wanted this. Plus, it's the night before the field trip... Sleepy, not horny. Rest, not lust. That's what I'm after right now..."

"What are you mumblin' about, Senpai? You know people who talk to themselves are seen as weirdos who can't make any friends, right?"

"I'm not talking to myself. I'm trying to convince the gods of something here."

"Wait, are you sure *that's* what you want to go with? That's a billion times weirder than talking to yourself." I could hear the grimace in Iroha's voice.

If only she'd just let me be weird. Her comments were pulling me back from the brink of sleep. My brain was as effective as Jell-O for all the logical thinking power it had right now, and I pointedly turned my back to Iroha and pulled the covers over my head. Only to have them pulled back again a moment later.

I said nothing.

"Nyeh heh heh." Iroha twisted her head—and only her head—in my direction, a malicious grin on her face and a suspect twinkle in her eye.

Mentally sending curses her way, I pulled the duvet up again.

"Bah!" The duvet came down again.

"Gaaargh! Would you *quit it* already?! What the hell have I done to deserve this?!"

I was a patient guy, but even I had my limit. What, I can't be patient because I snapped after only the second time? I'd like to see you try and put up with this crap even *once*. Then tell me I've got a short fuse.

"I'm not gonna let you sleep tonight!" Iroha cackled.

"Why are you so hyper right now? Lemme sleep. The field trip's tomorrow."

"Yeah, that's *why* I'm doing this—so that you oversleep and get left behind. Everyone'll see that even you, a guy who's in total control

of his life like some superhuman robot, can be scatterbrained. Your popularity'll explode 'til everyone in your class wants to be friends with you! Congratulations, Senpai! You're gonna be the real winner of this field trip!"

"Wow, thanks so much. Too bad I'm not like you or Tomosaka, so I don't *want* to be popular. And I never will be."

As an honor student, Iroha was constantly the center of attention in her classroom, and her friend Tomosaka Sasara was always competing for that attention. The pair had a brilliance about them that surpassed the popularity scale and was beyond the reach of your average human.

They were both physically attractive, of course, but they also hid secret talents. In Iroha's case it was her acting and in Sasara's, her ability to dominate social media. These hidden skills were the source of the confidence and charisma they displayed on the outside. It was obvious that was the very reason they were so popular. It was ridiculous to think I could measure up to that by standing out *once* over some stupid blunder.

"But you wanted to start acting like a normie, didn't you, Senpai?"

"I'm just reevaluating my views on my private life a little, that's all. I don't wanna be a normie, and anyway, I'll never have the qualifications to become one."

"Don'tcha think you're being a little harsh on yourself? Knowing you, Senpai, you could easily become a normie if you put your mind to it!"

"I'll believe that when you show me the evidence. And it'd better be good, since you've clearly put a lot of thought into this."

"Don't start getting analytical on me! I'm just trying to have a conversation with you. What's the point in taking a break from *Koyagi* if you're not gonna switch off that part of your brain?" Iroha shook her head in disapproval.

"You don't have to start being reasonable now, you know..." I murmured, knowing I was coming off a little whiny.

It was only because what she said made perfect sense. I'd spoken to several first-rate professionals lately—Canary, Amachi Otoha, Tsukinomori Mizuki—and kept an eye on the trends in Honeyplace Works, and I'd started to realize the Alliance couldn't be content to just sit and play around in its little *Koyagi* bubble anymore.

Which was nice to know, but our team was tiny and without a proper budget or a good number of personnel. Pushing that team too hard could cause real damage, like the recent incident with Sumire's back.

If I wanted my teammates to rest, I needed to take the lead and rest myself. I then needed to take advantage of that spare time to talk

to more people outside of our product's fans, broaden my horizons, and come up with a game that would blow *Koyagi* out of the water in terms of popularity.

That was the plan at least, but I couldn't see the harm in taking some time out just to have fun with my classmates either...

"If you wanna blend in with the population at large, the first step is to stay up all night and play games with me!"

"You sure have a lot of confidence for someone who just spouted nonsense. You're not doing this for me. You just wanna play games."

"Yup!"

"At least deny it!"

Iroha was a hundred times clingier than usual tonight. Was this what cats and dogs were like the day before their owners went off on vacation? I suspected so, but I'd never owned a pet, so I wasn't sure.

There was no doubt that this was a problem, though. If I didn't get any sleep, then being left behind might actually become reality. I didn't want to be left out...

Turns out I had nothing to worry about.

Just a few minutes later, in a complete one-eighty from her hyperactive frenzy, Iroha had flung her upper body onto my bed and fallen fast asleep, lying there like a pile of laundry I hadn't bothered to put away yet.

"I forgot that Iroha actually takes care of her health. I bet she'd struggle to stay up late even if she wanted to."

What a handful. I could hardly believe she'd tried to push herself to pull an all-nighter with me, when I'd only be gone for a few days. It wasn't like I was moving abroad or anything. Did my friend's little sister really crave attention this much?

Her batteries had run completely dry. I studied her face, a natural smile forming on my lips, before my eyelids became too heavy to keep open.

"Goodnight," I said, even though there was nobody to hear me. Then, I let the gentle current of sleep pull me under.

"C-Cold!"

A sudden chill had me jumping out of bed.

What the hell is that?!

Pulled forcefully from my sleep, I sat up in bed and instinctively looked around the room. I wasn't mad at the disturbance. I didn't know how long I'd slept for, but judging from how refreshed my body felt, it was probably enough to call it a good night's sleep—but anybody would be on high alert if they were woken up by the ringing of an alarm they couldn't remember setting. Especially when they

were so used to their neighbor coming in and out of their apartment freely, but not to being woken up by such conventional means.

I needed to get up, apprehend the culprit (probably Iroha), and give her a stern lecture as quickly as I could.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Excuse me? What the hell are *you* doing?”

“Wh— Mashiro...san?”

There, next to my bed, was a beautiful silver-haired girl, glaring down at me with her hands on her hips.

It was Tsukinomori Mashiro. As cold as her skin was pale, and with a sharp ton—okay, I’ve been through this already. The point is, Mashiro was standing there, her gaze so icy it was like a full-on blizzard. Every hair on my skin was standing on end, and I found myself wondering how I was still alive after being exposed to that glower.

Oh, you’re wondering why I called her “-san”? It was something about the imposing atmosphere around her that forced me to speak respectfully.

At first I thought it was that look that was making shivers run across my body, but it was nothing so supernatural; it was just that the bedroom window had been flung open, letting in a full blast of the crisp fall wind. Actually, I shouldn’t be acting so blasé about that.

“What did you open my window for?”

“Why, do you have a problem with that?”

“...No, ma’am.” Her tone invited no argument and made me shuffle to sit up straight on the bed. I didn’t get it. This was my apartment—she was the one who came in here and opened my window without asking, so why was I feeling apologetic? Why had she launched this assault so early this morning in the first place? “U-Um, Mashiro-san. May I ask why you are mad?”

“You can’t guess?”

“Er, no... I’m afraid I haven’t got a clue.”

“Oh? You mean it’s normal for you to let Iroha-chan sleep soundly on your bed like that?” Mashiro stabbed her finger towards the foot of the bed, like she was condemning the person at its end to hell. I followed that finger, only to find Iroha sleeping peacefully in the exact same position she’d fallen asleep last night. “What happened to being my boyfriend? Or do you think your relationship status doesn’t matter, and you can bring a girl to sleep with whenever you want regardless?”

“Uh...”

“You’re a cheater!”

“I’m really sorry!”

I had no valid excuse. I was trash, pure and simple. Sure, I wasn’t

actually dating Mashiro, but she still had the right to complain about this.

"I can't believe this! You're the worst! A pervert! A demon of lust!"

"I'm not! I promise we didn't do anything weird! You've got this all wrong, Mashiro!"

"What, so you're making excuses *and* trying to pin the blame on me? What, I'm so dumb I can't understand? Is that it?"

"No! That's not what I'm saying!"

"You never know how to react when you get caught doing something bad. You know even grade schoolers can figure that much out, right? You disappoint me."

"I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! I messed up!"

"You think I'm gonna forgive you just because you apologized?"

"Hngh. I wanna tell you how unreasonable that is, but I don't think you're in the mood to hear me out..."

"Of course I'm not! You just need to shut up and take it! Hmph!" Mashiro pouted and looked away pointedly, before muttering, "After all the courage I plucked up, thinking we could get closer on this trip... Things couldn't have started off any worse!"

"Um... Er... I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Could you please say it again, a little louder, so that my defective ears might be able to hear you?"

"I was just saying how scumbags who pick up girls the night before their honeymoon can go die in a fire!"

"That's a hell of a thing to 'just say'! Also, this isn't our honeymoon; it's just a field trip."

"Excuse me? Do you really think you're in a position to be making comments right now?"

"I'm sorry."

"Hmph!" Mashiro snorted and turned her attention to the rest of the items in the room. "I see. So she came to play games."

There was the controller lying next to Iroha's hand, and the TV screen was still on, showing the hunter stuck in an endless idle animation while staring down the receptionist in front of her. It seemed the evidence was enough to bring Mashiro back to her senses.

"That's right," I said. "Otoha-san's gone off on business, so Iroha came over to get her fill of games. Personally, I didn't think she had to come over right away. She'll be able to play here all she wants once we're on the field trip."

"I know she's my enemy, Aki, but don't you think that's a little mean?"

"What?"

"Oh, never mind. It's probably better for me if I don't say

anything.”

The heck was she talking about?



The girls in my life had a habit of making mystifying statements and speaking under their breath so that I couldn't make out what they were saying. I wish they wouldn't; there was a risk I was missing some vital information that I might have been able to use to make my life more efficient.

At least it didn't sound like Mashiro was mad anymore. I decided to get up before I did something to make her mad again, so we could put this all behind us.

Just as I made to get out of bed and the sheets rustled, Iroha started to squirm.

"Mmnggh... Senpai... It's cold..." She pulled the covers towards herself. Once they were all crumpled up by her, she buried her face into them. "Mmh... Senpai's smell... So comforting..."

"Ngh... Nghh...!"

Apparently those words had ignited the TNT that was Mashiro's temper.

"Iroha-chan! Wake. *Up!*"

"'My Girlfriend and My Friend's Little Sister Want to Fight to the Death!' What do you think, Aki? Now *there's* a light novel title for you."

"You could have said anything else, but you chose to try and make me mad? I fear for the day you finally cross a line of some kind, Ozu."

"Wait, I messed the title up. It should be: 'My Cousin and Childhood Friend, who's also my Fake Girlfriend, and My Friend's Little Sister Want to Fight to the Death!'"

"That's too much unnecessary information for a title. Cramming as much as possible in there to try and convey more can actually just make it real confusing."

Chapter 1: My Group Has It In for Me!

“Dammit, looks like almost everyone’s here already. We might actually be the last to show up.”

“You almost made us late, Aki. I hope you’re happy.”

“C’mon, *Iroha* made things complicated, so... Actually, can we just forget about this already? Please don’t tell me you’re planning to hold it over me the whole trip.”

“Hmph. Fine. I’ll let you off with a suspended sentence for now.”

“Thank you for your generosity.”

We hurried towards Tokyo Station, our eyes on the group of students wearing our familiar uniform up ahead. It was quite a sight, seeing them all matching, lined up in the large plaza outside the grand station.

From here, we would be taking the shinkansen to Kyoto, hence its sensible selection as the meeting spot. That did *not* mean that Mashiro and I were next to each other on the train all the way here—right after our hellish start to the morning.

Mashiro had been *mad*, lecturing me icily about how she was my girlfriend, while *Iroha* had just laughed at my panicked reactions. I couldn’t believe *Iroha* still stirred the pot, all the while knowing how Mashiro really felt about me. Maybe it was a part of her promise from the culture festival, to be extra annoying from now on?

Well, whatever.

The awkwardness continued for the entire train ride here. Why did Ozu insist on being somewhere else when I needed him the most? He spent the night before in a hotel near the station. I wish he wouldn’t out-efficiency me like that. I barely had any identity as it was.

“Ah.” I couldn’t help but gasp when I noticed Mashiro’s face. I knew things were supposed to be awkward, but now she looked even grumpier on top of that. “Hey, Mashiro?”

“What?”

“Let’s make this a fun trip, okay?”

“I’d have been happy to, if you hadn’t started off the day being so annoying.”

What could I say to that?

I *had* messed up this morning, but I still wanted to encourage her

to enjoy herself. I could still remember the look on her face at the summer festival, when we were watching the fireworks from the top of that tree. She had talked about plucking up the courage to get closer to me, and this trip should be a great opportunity for her to do just that.

I still didn't know where my own feelings were at, so it was impossible for me to say whether things would end up the way Mashiro wanted them. Whichever way any romantic desires inside me might go, I honestly did want Mashiro to have fond memories of this trip. Yeah, I know. I was being irresponsible and self-centered.

Mashiro's puffed-up cheeks deflated. "Thanks, though. Let's make it a good one, Aki." She still seemed a little withdrawn, but her tone sounded just a tiny bit gentler.

The two of us started walking again.

One of the students noticed our approach and casually raised a hand to beckon us over. He welcomed us with a friendly smile. It was, of course, my only friend—Kohinata Ozuma, otherwise known as Ozu, who had officially cemented his position as the most handsome guy in school since his victory in the King Nevermore contest.

"You two look like you had fun this morning."

"You already know everything, right? I bet you were entertained."

"Huh? What are you talking about? I don't know anything about Iroha taking advantage of the fact that neither mom or I were home to stay over at your place and clash with Tsukinomori-san."

"That's a hell of a ton of accurate detail for someone who doesn't know anything."

"Educated guess." Ozu grinned.

"Hngh... That's a hell of a guess for someone who spends all his time thinking about programming." I glared at him.

Ozu was a good guy by nature, but he was still related to Iroha and Otoha-san. That family had an innate mean streak running through their veins.

Our hushed conversation was interrupted by a heavy thump on my shoulder.

"What's all this flirtin' over here, Ooboshi? You don't wanna make Tsukinomori-san jealous, do you?"

"Gah! ...Oh, it's you, Suzuki."

I turned around. There was the muscular Suzuki, his skin a healthy brown, and his grinning teeth shiny and white. His short-sleeved shirt was flung wide open, revealing his tank top to the world. What do you mean it's a cold autumn? Yeah, no, clearly he was confident his superior metabolic rate could handle it.

He'd started working out because of a small prank of mine, and now that I looked, he really had beefed up. He sat near me in class,

and we ended up in the same group for the field trip. That encouraged me to finally memorize his full name: Suzuki Takeshi.

The weight of his muscular shoulder against mine was all the evidence I needed that his hard work had paid off.

“You seem kinda gloomy, man. Sure you’re workin’ out enough?”

“This morning *was* kinda crazy, so I didn’t get the chance. But I can assure you I work out every day without fail.”

“That’s great to hear! That’s my model trainee!” Suzuki laughed like we’d known each other for years. I would’ve cringed at that attitude not that long ago, but right now I felt like he was perfectly justified in acting this way, seeing as we were in the same group. I *had* wondered why he’d joined my group when I was sure he must have had a ton of other guy friends in the class, so I had asked him.

“I can hang with those guys whenever I want, but you seem real busy, like, a hundred percent of the time. Just thought I’d take the chance to get to know you,” he’d answered without hesitation.

He was way too nice. If I’d known from the start, maybe I would’ve actually *helped* him win Sumire’s heart.

So yeah, he was being all buddy-buddy with me because we were in the same group, but if I was honest, his clinginess was a little annoying.

“A model trainee? Get outta here. Plus, why are you acting like we’re best friends or something?”

“C’mon, let’s be pals, yeah? We’re going on a trip together! Don’t you also think we should get along, Kohinata?” Suzuki grinned at Ozu, encouraging his support.

Ozu faltered, the smile on his face freezing. “U-Um...” An invisible circle looped round and round over his head while he picked out an optimal response. “Just try to go easy on us, Suzuki-kun.”

“Huh? Weird way to put it. Whatever! Let’s do this thing!” Suzuki laughed Ozu’s odd response off, but I couldn’t let it slide.

“Ozu?” I prompted, frowning.

His odd choice of words reminded me of something I might pick out from one of Makigai Namako-sensei’s scripts when I was proofreading it, but it was more than that. I’d known Ozu since junior high school, and I knew those words were hastily cobbled together.

“Hey, Suzuki, check it out! Sumire-sensei’s wearing black tights, and her legs look *amazing*!”

“What, no way! Where?!”

I pointed in a random direction, and Suzuki took the bait spectacularly, leaving us alone as he went in search of Sumire’s stockings. It was a wild goose chase, of course. Sumire might have been trash, but she was *our* trash, and I wasn’t about to stoop to using her luscious legs to get us out of a jam.

I brought my face close to Ozu's ear while Suzuki was distracted. "You okay? Struggling with how to reply?"

"Ah. I guess you would pick up on that, huh?"

"Yeah... You've mastered classroom communication perfectly, but I'm guessing a field trip is so different to your average school day that it's throwing you off?"

"I don't have enough samples to go off of... I can just about deal with girls, but when it comes to guys, I can't find any examples of how to talk to them."

He knew how to communicate with girls, but not with guys. Without context, that might make him sound like a massive playboy, but that wasn't the case here.

"I guess there aren't that many slice-of-life games or manga that include a field trip, huh?"

"I think there are more interactions between guys in stuff aimed towards girls, like the ones Sumire-sensei was recommending to me. But I felt like she had an ulterior motive, so I didn't touch them."

"Good call. Just goes to show how much you've grown, that you can make that kinda judgment."

Ozu chuckled and scratched at his cheek, feeling awkward. "I caused way too much trouble for you before, and didn't wanna make the same mistake twice..."

I was sure he and I were remembering the same incident. Ozu used to be an outcast in the classroom because of his inability to understand other people's feelings, so I used games, manga, and other media to drum into him the basics of communication.

To be more accurate, I encouraged him to emulate them. He didn't need to understand or agree with what was going on, nor should it matter how he *wanted* to react. All he needed to do was study the other person's reactions or words, and come back with a prepared response—a strategy that enabled him to socialize with others at the most basic of levels.

I always knew it was a flimsy method that wouldn't protect Ozu if he was really pushed, but I taught it to him anyway, just so that he could enter high school without being immediately ostracized.

It was that slipshod education that allowed him to be influenced by female-oriented media and, on one occasion, interact with me like we were two characters in a yaoi manga, *right* in front of Sumire and — Ugh, no, I think I might die on the spot if I think too hard about it.

Up until then, Sumire had always managed to keep her delusions about real people to herself, but with that one incident, she had thrown all her restraint out of the window, morality and all. It had taught me a valuable, painful lesson: there are some things in life that can never be undone.

And those things can have horrifying, long-lasting consequences.
But enough about the past. I needed to make sure Ozu was okay right now.

"I'll keep an eye out to make sure you don't mess up too. I know this is only gonna help to a certain extent, but try and focus on talking to the girls instead of the guys when we're with our group. That should make things easier for you."

"Yeah, that sounds like a safe option. I'll do that."

Just then, I felt a tug on my shirt.

"Are you done indulging in your friendship yet?"

I turned around to find a disgruntled Mashiro behind me. Her eyes were accusatory, and a little moist. "Your guy friend starts talking to you, so you use it as an excuse to ignore your girlfriend—for ages. You're despicable."

"Ack... Wait, hold on a second. Weren't we just talking about how we were gonna make this a fun trip?"

"Yes, but you're on a suspended sentence. You *do* know what that means, right?"

"More or less. As much as the next guy, at least."

"Then you'll know that committing another offense while you're on a suspended sentence means the death penalty."

"The *death* penalty? If I may raise an objection, that sounds a little harsh."

"Shut it. If you're really sorry for what you did, then stop ignoring me. Do your duty as my boyfriend properly. I'm expecting you to make sure we have fun on this trip." As she spoke, Mashiro clung to my arm like a koala and leaned against me.

"R-Right..."

I knew how she felt...but she didn't have to make such a grandiose display of public affection, did she? The other students' gazes were already drawing towards us.

Recently, Mashiro's beauty had started to emulate Mizuki-san's more and more, and here she was making a passionate pass at me. The sharper gazes—the ones that pricked my skin—were from our jealous male classmates.

From an outsider's perspective, it must've looked like I had it all. At this point, even I was aware of *that*.

In a manner of speaking, this was exactly how I wanted us to be perceived. Mashiro needed me as her fake boyfriend to keep away the kind of guys who were nothing but trouble, and to reduce the risk of being bullied. Essentially, so that she could live an anxiety-free school life. That she was in a relationship, especially one that was obviously so loving, did plenty to crush our male classmates' spirits.

As for the girls, many of them were perfectly happy to see a plain

average Joe like me get snapped up, sending me off with a smile and a wave. There was no jealousy, no heartbreak, no trouble.

Being totally unpopular has *amazing* advantages! Ha ha ha!

...

No, I'm *not* crying. Shut up!

"Come on, Tsukinomori-san. Don't be like that! It's a field trip!"

"Huh?" I gawked.

A girl in our class had snapped at Mashiro, and I'd felt Mashiro jump against my arm—something I hadn't been expecting.

It was weird. I thought Mashiro was doing a good job at being my girlfriend. And, while I hadn't done any work to make her any friends, I'd at least made sure she hadn't attracted any negative attention.

So why was this female classmate glowering at us?

Mashiro must have been as uneasy about the whole thing as I was; her face was pale and glued to her feet, like she couldn't bear to look this girl in the eye. I was painfully aware of what that felt like.

"U-Um, I'm sorry if we're being inappropriate. But please don't blame Mashiro—"

"Stop stealing all her attention, Ootrashy!"

"She didn't mean to— Wait, I'm the one under fire here?!"

"Let's go, Tsukinomori-san!"

"Eek!"

"H-Hey, don't pull on her like that, she's not— Gaargh!"

This girl's arms were so tiny, I had no idea where she had the strength to tear Mashiro's body away from mine. And when she glared at me, it was like a terrifying snake staring down a mongoose.

"We want a chance to flirt with Tsukinomori-san too!"

This girl's IQ had to be through the floor to be able to phrase it in the dumbest way possible like that. She *did* look like the superficial type: the type whose brain lacked structural integrity, with wavy hair dyed brown, and whose bright eyeshadow was her most identifiable feature.

I barely remembered any of my classmates' names, but even I knew who *she* was. It wasn't because she was famous or anything; she was just in my class at school. Not *everyone* in my life is a celebrity.

Takamiya Asuka.

Why did I know her name? Simply because she was in our group for the field trip.

There were three boys: Ozu, Suzuki, and me. We were joined by three girls: Mashiro, Takamiya, and the serious-looking one standing next to her, Maihama Kyouko. The six of us would be sticking together during the coming days.

"We lucked out getting in the same group, so let's have some girl time! Kyouko also agrees with me!"

“U-Um, actually, I think Tsukinomori-san seems like she’d rather hang out with her boyfriend...”

“Are you kidding? They’re already all over each other in class! You guys can dial it down a bit now that we’re on the field trip, right, Tsukinomori-san?”

“I-If you think I’ll be good enough company...”

“Right! So it’s a promise!” Takamiya, who clearly didn’t know what the word “promise” meant, was clinging to Mashiro and shaking her around like a plushie she’d just bought.

“Waaah!” Without the wherewithal to form a proper sentence, Mashiro just took it, her eyes spinning.

It was hard to believe she was usually capable of such eloquent abuse. Iroha or Sumire would have been able to push an annoyance like Takamiya away easily, with a couple of insults added for good measure. This was where Mashiro’s shyness was more obvious; she wasn’t able to reject someone she didn’t really know. She’d made some real progress through summer vacation, and this field trip might be an important motivator to push forward and make more friends.

This was an important event for me too: a kind of test to see if I could really make the most of, and enjoy, my time off. Spending all my time fussing over Mashiro would probably earn me a sigh from the Alliance. It would mean I hadn’t managed to switch off my director’s brain, even on a trip.

Out of the blue, I noticed a change in the air around us. A hush spread through the crowd, starting with the group closest to the front and spreading like a chain reaction all the way to our group, which itself eventually fell silent. It wasn’t just our class; students across the year group held their breath, their eyes fixed in front as the rhythmic clicking of heels on the ground accompanied the conspicuous arrival of a single female teacher.

“It appears you all know your manners. I’ll commend you for that.”

The way her violet hair fluttered in the morning breeze was proof of her majesty. This teacher, taking an outrageous dominant attitude, had now evolved into her final form as the Venomous Queen.

As the woman who organized and took charge of the field trip, for the next few days she would have more authority than even the head of year. Her name was Kageishi Sumire. She was a demon of education with nerves of steel; powerful, sporty, and intelligent, strict on both herself and others as she ruled her students with an iron fist.

Or so everybody else thought. Don’t ask me why. The truth was not nearly as pretty.

She was actually a demon of trashed schedules with no respect for deadlines; uncontrollable, lazy, and dirty-minded, soft on both herself

and others as she perved over those around her with a soppy gaze. The incredible quality of her illustrations mostly offset her lack of value as a human being, but because she insisted on lecturing her students about life without even an ounce of self-reflection, her useless side just about won out.

What a shame.

Apparently she liked to remain blindfolded when looking in the mirror, even when it came to something as major as a field trip.

“I hope you’ll continue in this manner throughout the trip. Anybody found ruining things for everyone else *will* be dealt with mercilessly,” Sumire said, her gaze as sharp as a commander leading an army of demons.

As someone who knew what she was really like, watching this whole charade just felt weird. Still, her words were enough to tighten up the atmosphere around the students, so I could only deduce that her teaching skills were first-class. I think.

“Hm?”

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I checked it; it was a LIME message from Iroha.

Iroha: Senpai! There’s something I *really* gotta tell you right now!

Hm? What could that be? She made it sound so serious, but I had a feeling it was all a ruse. I picked out an appropriate stamp to send back. It only took a second for her to see it, and another second for her to reply.

Iroha: If you are reading this you have been CURSED. If you don’t send a message confessing your undying love and loyalty to the kouhai who lives next door in the next 24 HOURS you will stay cursed FOREVER.

Jeez, what decade did she come from? This was the age of social media; nobody got tricked by these ancient chain messages anymore. Not that I thought Iroha was trying to trick me—I knew she was just messing around.

“*Stop going on your phone in class and pay attention like a good honor student,*” I replied.

Another second passed, and I received a sticker with a character poking its tongue out at me. Damn Iroha. Was she really planning on bullying me long-distance now?

My phone battery wasn’t going to last long if she kept on messaging me like this.

“Wait... Oh, crap...” As I rummaged through my bag, my mouth fell open.

I had left my charger at home.

Dammit. It must’ve been because of all the fuss the girls were making this morning, distracting me from properly checking that I had everything.

It’d be annoying if my phone ran out of juice, but I supposed I could just ask to borrow Ozu’s charger if I needed to. He was an engineer, and he loved his electronics. I knew he’d have a number of phones, with chargers and adapters for all of them, even when out and about. You could always rely on your friends.

As soon as every class was done with its roll call and Her Majesty was done telling us what to do and what not to do, we set off. We were split into a number of groups, each with a different shinkansen train to catch. Trying to get every student onto the same train at the same time would get messy, so that wasn’t an option, but I could only imagine how tough it would be on Sumire to have to manage all these separate groups.

Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry. I’m supposed to be thinking like a teenager right now. I’m just so used to using the director part of my brain, so I hope you’ll cut me some slack.

Our group would be taking the same train as the advanced class. Funny that the class with Midori, the head of the field trip committee, and the class of her beloved sister Sumire should be on the same train. Did I detect a hint of nepotism? Or was it my imagination? Their seats *were* pretty close together.

Once we’d gotten on the train and put our luggage away, I shot Midori, who was in my periphery, a dubious glance. Midori’s eyes widened as they noticed my gaze, and she skittered over to me.

“H-Hey! Why are you staring at me? You’d better not be thinking anything inappropriate!”

“Not at all. Actually, I was thinking *you’re* the one being inappropriate.”

“E-Excuse me?! What are you saying?! Are you trying to accuse me of something?”

“Ah... Yeah, I’m sorry. I guess it’s kinda out of line, since I don’t have any proof. That wasn’t fair of me, and I apologize.”

If only I’d thought *before* I opened my mouth. There was a huge leap between Midori loving her sister and the conclusion that she’d rig it so they traveled together. It was scummy of me to make such an assumption.

“I just had my doubts about why our class happened to be traveling with the advanced class.”

“Gulp!”

“Huh? Is something wrong, Midori-san? You literally just said ‘gulp’ out loud...”

“N-N-No I didn’t! You imagined it!” Midori waved her hands in front of her face. Her cheeks were desperately red. “There’s nothing suspicious about the groupings. I may be the chair of the field trip committee, but every decision is made as a group. I cannot simply make something happen just because I want it to. You must be lacking in rationality if you believe, without any evidence, in the conspiracy that a single grand mastermind is pulling the strings behind the entire world. *Do you believe that?!*”

“I-I get your point. Your reasoning is top-notch, and I can’t argue with it.” Which was why I apologized just now. “I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions. I know there’s no evidence for it, just because you wanted to be with Sumire-sensei—”

“It’s a relief you understand. There was never any way I could rig the groups so as to make sure I was traveling on the same train as you.”

“—doesn’t mean there was any way you could rig the groups so as to... Wait, me? Why?”

I spoke along with her, expecting to be in unison for the entire thing—until she threw me a curveball. Such a small but significant difference.

“Wh-Why you? U-U-Um, well...”

Right, left, right, left, up, down. Her eyes changed direction so rapidly, even a pro gamer would struggle to input controls *that* quickly. Just as the redness in her cheeks was reaching boiling point, Midori squeezed her eyes shut and curled up her hands into fists.

“I-It’s because you’re the most likely to bring perverted contraband with you on this trip, *obviously!*” she cried, trampling over my reputation there and then.

I could hear the other students whispering among themselves, and they turned to look in our direction.

“W-Wait, Midori-san, what the heck are you shouting about? I would never do something like that!”

“Damn, way to go, Ooboshi! This is why I love guys. You gotta show it to us after, ’kay?”

“Stop that, Asuka-chan! Ooboshi-kun, I don’t think bringing that kind of stuff was a very good idea...”

The girls in our group, who had finished putting their luggage away, had returned only to hear what Midori said, and they reacted as though it were all true.

Ugh. They barely knew me. I didn’t want one of their first impressions of me to be that I was a pervert. Though they both

seemed the type to understand that I'd never cart that kind of thing around with me on a field trip. At least, once they got to know me.

I turned to make eye-contact with Mashiro and sent a silent message that only my (fake) girlfriend would understand: *save me*.

"You're gross."

"Huh?!"

All I got for my efforts were a cold glare and a thorny insult.

Mashiro really thinks that little of me?!

"I-I-I'm sorry, Ooboshi-kun! I didn't mean it like that!" Realizing her false accusation was starting to snowball, Midori quickly bowed her head at me. She opened her mouth again to give an honest explanation to the whispering onlookers. "I didn't mean that Ooboshi-kun has anything inappropriate on him *necessarily*, like porn for example, just that the possibility that he might have porn was enough for me to have rigged the shinkansen groupings, should I have done so, and therefore have required a motive, and that motive would have been to supervise him to make sure he didn't have porn, but for now there is no way to tell whether he has any porn on him until we look in his suitcase, so for the time being this is a Schrödinger's cat situation, or if you will, Schrödinger's porn—"

"Aaargh! Stop saying 'porn'!"

I honestly appreciated her efforts to clear up the misunderstanding, but this was clearly having the opposite effect! Not to mention her usual eloquence was tying itself up in knots. It'd be impossible to read as words on a page, and I knew the only thing everyone else was hearing was just my name together with the word "porn."

Nowadays the world was full of people who only read an article's title before convincing themselves they knew every last detail of the story, and such an environment was prime for these same people to hear "Ooboshi-kun" and "porn" and for the rumor that "Ooboshi-kun has porn" to start spreading.

"Y-You're right. 'Porn' is much too indecent of a word. How about 'materials of an immoral and sensitive nature'?"

"How about you *stop talking*?!"

She was really putting her foot in her mouth. Only, for some inexplicable reason, the negative consequences were all raining down on me instead of her...

"Disaster strikes, right outta the gate..."

"Aha ha ha. Tough break, Aki."

By the time I'd managed to calm Midori down, get past the chaos, and make it to my assigned seat, I was already totally exhausted. Each group had two rows of three seats, which could be flipped around for all six members to face each other, which was how we sat. Our row

had Suzuki by the window, Ozu in the middle, and me by the aisle. Opposite us was Maihama next to the window, Takamiya in the middle, and Mashiro across from me. Our fellow group members had probably arranged it so that we would face each other.

"Y'know, I never expected you to be so close with Kageishi-san, Ooboshi," Takamiya said.

"No?"

Apart from anything else, did that display really make us seem "close"? Maybe that was what passed for "close" these days, in the eyes of high-energy delinquents like Takamiya.

"I know what it is," Maihama said. "Remember, Asuka-chan? Ooboshi-kun helped out the drama club with that fair a while back, and went up on stage..."

"Oh yeah!"

The two girls' casual exchange was tempered by a surprised overreaction from two of us, me and Mashiro.

"You know about that?" I gasped.

"Of course. A club getting into a national competition is a big deal for our school. The school newspaper picked up on it too," Maihama said in a tone that suggested it should be obvious.

She was the epitome of seriousness clothed in a school uniform. Ignoring the scatterbrain that was Takamiya for now, if Maihama thought it should be common knowledge, then perhaps *I* was wrong.

She mentioned the school newspaper too. I had no idea anybody even read that thing. It was unthinkable to someone like me, who couldn't give a crap about the stuff any of the clubs produced.

"Yeah, I totally remember now!" Takamiya said. "There was someone else too. Some famous girl from the first years who joined the play..."

"I'm fairly sure it was Kohinata-san, the top student in the year."

"That super polite, super cute girl? Whoa! You acted with *her*, Ooboshi?! *Damn!*"

Maihama let out a small laugh. "I would've liked to see that. Do you think they'd at least let me read the script if I visited the drama club?"

Mashiro twitched once, before she started fully trembling, her face pale as she looked in Maihama's direction. "No. You shouldn't do that."

"Wha? Why not?"

"I don't want anyone else to have to read that cringey script ever again."

"I don't think that's very kind to the person who wrote it. I know some people said it was cringe, but that might just have been a rumor. Others were saying it was written by a famous author."

“AAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Mashiro let out a horrific scream and writhed like a demon being exorcised by holy light.

I guess it *would* be difficult to withstand a sickeningly lovey-dovey script for an unsocial type like her. Even then, I couldn't help but think she was overreacting a little.

“Oh hey, I didn't know you helped out the drama club too, Ooboshi.”

“Whaddya mean by ‘too,’ Suzuki? Yer face is sayin’ ya *know* somethin’!” Takamiya grinned.

“Nah, nothing like that. It's just that Ooboshi helped me out also.”

“What?”

What the heck was Suzuki talking about? His tone was awash with gratitude, but I couldn't for the life of me remember giving him any sort of assistance ever.

Suzuki rubbed his finger under his nose (apparently he didn't get the memo that anime characters don't do that anymore) and his cheeks reddened just slightly as he said, “If you wanna know the truth...I got myself a girlfriend.”

“Whoa! Nice one, Suzuki!”

“Congratulations!”

Those swift reactions came from Takamiya and Maihama. Unfortunately, neither Ozu, who had very little data on how to respond to a guy other than himself getting a girlfriend, nor Mashiro, who didn't have the first clue on how to speak to normies, could say a thing. They could only stare with their mouths slightly parted.

Then there was me, who struggled with positive responses in any situation.

“Um... Congratulations?”

“Thanks! I couldn't have done it without you, Ooboshi!”

That made zero sense to me; I failed to find even the tiniest fragment of logic.

“Sorry, but do you think you could explain?”

“Sure. I mean, I've been really into my muscle training lately, right? That's thanks to you! You told me the best way to win Kageishi-sensei's heart was to beef up, remember?”

“O-Oh. I guess I did.”

Yeah, I did tell him that—to get him out of my hair.

“It was 'cause of your advice back then that I landed a girlfriend! I can't thank you enough.”

“Wait, hold up a second. Your girlfriend isn't Sumire-sensei, right?”

Sumire hadn't told me anything, but it'd be good news if it *was* her. Although, I could imagine it'd be difficult for her to hide her true

self if she dated a student, and I couldn't help but wonder how she was faring on that front.

Wait, what if I exchanged contact information with Suzuki? Then, even if Sumire ran away from me right before a deadline, I could get him to hound her for the illustration for me!

For that split second, hope inflated my chest.

"Nah, not her. I'm dating a girl I met at my gym."

"Oh. Right." Just like that, my hopes were dashed, and I wasn't able to hide the disappointment on my face.

"I used to want to go out with the Venomous Queen, but when I started trainin', I realized my limits, like, she's in another league, y'know?"

"I'll say."

Compared to a man who exercised properly, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was twenty thousand leagues under the sea. Thirty minutes in the gym would have her on the floor, her limbs left with the structural integrity of overcooked cabbage.

"I love my girlfriend, and since we started dating, I realized something. Those feelings I had for Sumire-sensei—they weren't love."

"What were they, then?"

"Admiration... Respect. I just misinterpreted those emotions as love."

"You misinterpreted your feelings?"

His confession resonated with me for some reason. Youth and love... I'd always turned my back on those things. Instead, I had thrown myself into work, as efficiently as possible. If ever I used to know what true romantic feelings were, I sure as hell didn't now. Honestly, I wasn't confident I had a proper understanding of those emotions anymore.

Suzuki sounded like he'd found his answer relatively quickly, and that made me jealous.

"No way!" Takamiya said. "You were just *thirsty* for her, right? What with her good looks, and her long legs in those tights! C'mon, admit it!"

"Okay, you got me! Ha ha ha!"

Forget what I said. No way would I ever be jealous of this guy. Just moments ago I had been pouring my heart out, and now I was wondering whether it had a vacuum function to suck it all back in.

Having shattered my emotions with his belly laugh, Suzuki brought the conversation back on track.

"My point is, I followed Ooboshi's advice, beefed up, and found a nice chick! That's why I owe him one!" Suzuki laughed.

"I think you're reading too much into it. Your success has nothing to do with me."

Ozu chuckled. “Let him be grateful if he wants, right? What’s the harm?”

“Yeah, that’s right! Thanks for backin’ me up, Kohinata!” Suzuki flung an arm around Ozu’s shoulders, and the two laughed together. Why they were ganging up on me, I had no clue.

“Y-You know, I think I get what you’re saying, Kohinata-kun! Ooboshi-kun, you’ve got this mature and dependable air about you.”

Now even Maihama was joining their ranks. It was obvious that she was just jumping on the bandwagon without much evidence—unlike the boys, I hadn’t done anything to help her out personally—but I’d probably only get even more compliments if I tried to point that out, so I didn’t.

Oh, and I wasn’t cringey enough to think Maihama might be falling for me just because she seemed a little flustered as she praised me. She was probably trying to be subtle about it, but her gaze was pointed directly at Ozu. She was after *him*, not me—agreeing with his opinion in an attempt to show they had something in common!

I didn’t need a pipe and a deerstalker hat to work *that* one out.

Maihama Kyouko was obviously one of those girls who had their sights set on Ozu for a while now. She had tried to invite him to the summer festival back before the vacation. I hadn’t had anything to do with her back then, so I hadn’t made any effort to learn her name.

Thinking back, I couldn’t help but admire her resolve in asking Ozu on a date and making sure she was in the same class trip group as him. I could tell that she was trying her hardest to close the distance between them. Her heart was urging her to rush forward.

I used to look down on people who let youth and romance dictate their actions, but I now realized that she was taking on the challenge to chase her dreams in the same way I was.

I glanced at Mashiro, sitting across from me.

She had also had resolve when she confessed her feelings for me. I rejected her back then, judging that it wasn’t the right time for me to be thinking about romance, but she had come at me head-on. Contrary to popular belief, maybe it was actually girls who were more assertive when it came to romance.

“Hmph.” Mashiro caught my gaze then, narrowed her eyes, and pouted. “Look at you, fawning over some girl just ’cause she praised you. You make me sick.”

“Uh, I wasn’t actually, right?”

“I dunno. Try looking in a mirror and see for yourself.” Mashiro turned away pointedly, fully in grump mode. It didn’t look like we were going to get along today, thanks to what happened this morning.

I suddenly witnessed Mashiro’s puffed-up cheek being prodded by a finger. Takamiya’s, to be precise.

"You jealous of Kyouko? Omigosh, how adorable is *that*?"

"H-Hey. Stop poking me."

"I guess you and Ooboshi really are goin' out, huh? Otherwise you wouldn't get mad over somethin' like that. I don't see you guys actin' like a couple much, y'know? I thought you might've split up or something. Or maybe that you weren't actually going out in the first place."

Our faces froze at the exact same time.

"O-Obviously we're going out!" Mashiro said. "I told everyone that when I entered this school."

"I mean, that's weird in the first place. The normal thing to do is to hide your relationship, right?"

"I-It is? I didn't know that..."

"Me neither," I said.

I guess the existence of us unsociable types was kind of sad. Neither Mashiro nor I had ever dated before, and we barely had any friends, so we didn't have the first clue when it came to social norms.

"It's 'cause you went outta your way to tell everyone. So I thought, maybe some stuff happened at your old school, and you were worried about fittin' in, so you set up some kinda fake couple thing with Ooboshi. Though I guess that sorta stuff only happens in fiction!" Takamiya laughed.

"Y-Yeah, fiction. Your imagination is overactive. Right, Aki?"

"R-Right! Fake dating? What is that, a geek's greatest fantasy? Ha ha ha..."

Dammit, that laugh was way too forced! Why won't my facial muscles move?!

I had no idea anybody's instincts could be so accurate. Especially when she didn't even have a shred of proof!

Takamiya Asuka was clearly a girl to be feared. Maybe she was more than a delinquent: like a *rabid* delinquent. Not to mention she'd been Anonymous Classmate Number Whatever until very recently, only for me to discover now that she actually had an idiosyncratic personality. Was it me? Was there something about me that just attracted weirdos?

Or maybe everyone was like this, with their own individuality, and the only difference was whether I took the time to get to know them or not.

"Okay, y'know what? Is it okay if I ask somethin' I've been wondering about forever?"

"S-Sure."

"Where did you guys have your first date?"

"Our first date, huh? Well, I guess I could tell you..." I knew she was trying to sound reluctant, but she was doing a terrible job at

hiding that smile on her face.

Wait, I knew exactly what this was! You know when you get someone who *really* wants to go on and on about their love life, but when someone actually asks them, they pretend like they don't actually want to share anything? Mashiro used to *hate* that kind of cringey couple behavior.

It was a trend all too well documented by history. A hero dethroning a dictator in a war of liberation, only to rule the country in the exact same way after becoming king.

"We went to... Yeah, we went to this French restaurant on the top floor of this fancy hotel. The night view there was amazing."

"You're kidding. A fancy French restaurant for your first date? Ain't that kinda too extra?"

I couldn't agree more. Our real first date had been at the cinema in that shopping mall, but apparently Mashiro didn't count that. Okay, so it hadn't really been a date. Iroha had been there. Ozu and Sumire were *supposed* to have been there, but they dropped out because they thought it would be funny to have me go out with a mini-harem, I guess.

"It was really fancy, like nothing I'd ever experienced before," Mashiro said. "There were expensive-looking paintings on the walls, and the lights were dimmed, with only these lamps glowing softly under their shades. There was a pleasant but subtle fragrance in the air, and a comfortable classic melody playing in the background that you might not notice if you didn't pay attention. I was wearing the dress I'd saved for just such an occasion, and though I was nervous, I started to approach the table where Aki sat..."

"Damn, I can see it now..." Takamiya said.

"Me too, when I close my eyes. It's like you're reading from a well-written novel." Maihama sighed, blissful.

Mashiro *was* good at setting the scene. Not surprisingly. She may have only been an aspiring author, but she was being guided by a professional editor, making her semiprofessional herself.

Did she really have to put her authorial skills to use when describing our love life, though?

"The courses came out one after the other, each looking incredibly delectable and tasting as exquisite as any three-star meal. It was a struggle for me even to cut through butter with the knife, having only just researched the appropriate table manners for such an establishment. When I saw that reflection of myself in Aki's eyes, I felt a keen sense of embarrassment, and I had to look away..."

"That sounds so amazing! So classy! And a billion times more romantic than a South Korean drama."

"A knife with which you struggled to cut through butter! What a

wonderful twist on the classic metaphor. *A keen* sense from Aki. Such alliteration! Using Ooboshi-kun's eyes to describe yourself works to create an extra layer: the subtle sense that he was staring at his beloved! Oh Tsukinomori-san, I can really imagine how graceful you looked that evening."

And now Maihama was acting as though this were a literature class for some reason, making herself seem even more eccentric. Wasn't her crush on Ozu enough for me to remember her by? Why did she insist on trying to stand out even more? We already had the rabid delinquent, and now we had Literary Scholar Maihama Kyouko over here. I was kind of scared to discover how many other weirdos were hiding in my class.

"And then Aki looked me right in the eye."

"Ah..."

Mashiro had been speaking so fluently, but now she suddenly fell silent. It was obvious why. What happened next was classified information: it was the moment I rejected Mashiro's courageous confession.

I could only imagine how bad I'd come off if she continued. Our first date, and I rejected her. Mashiro had overcome that devastating experience and was doing her best to win me over even now. I had no idea what that must have been like; I'd always run away from romance and the fancies of youth.

But I bet it was overwhelmingly exhausting.

However Mashiro decided to present the next scene, I didn't have the right to butt in. I would take whatever she gave me, whether my blood ignited and sent my head flying off, or a shark burst through the window to decapitate me.

"I've reserved a room in this hotel. I hope you're ready, Mashiro, because I'm not letting you sleep tonight.' And then, Aki gently embraced me, and—"

"I did *not*!"

"Hmph. So you're denying it? I thought I was allowed to say whatever I wanted?"

"Yeah, I know I said that, but— Wait, no I didn't. I just thought it. Stay outta my head!"

"The moment the thought crossed your mind, it was already too late. You revoked your right to complain."

"What happened to freedom of thought?!"

"*You* don't get freedom of thought. My freedom of expression is more important."

I really didn't need her to use legal interpretation as a form of powerplay. I mean, I got that she couldn't tell everyone I rejected her, but we were just high schoolers. We couldn't be doing saxophone-

euphonium-xylophone. That form of bridal arts was only appropriate between a married man and woman.

Sorry, I'm trying to avoid saying it directly, so I'm using the most nonsensical words to describe it, but I think you know what I'm saying.

If you're confused about the saxophone-euphonium-xylophone thing, look at the first letter of each word and—yeah, you're right, no one cares.

I just didn't want Takamiya and Maihama getting any funny ideas about what happened, because who knew what sort of rumors would start flying between the girls in our class then?

But then, they were all normies. With their experiences, they'd know that this was just some overblown story that had been exaggerated for clout.

"Wow, way to go, Ooboshi! You weren't a virgin after all, huh?" Takamiya said. "Here, Kyouko-chin, the candy I owe you."

"Ah. Thanks."

"You're really out here making bets about people's first times?"

Not to mention they completely swallowed Mashiro's story. And Maihama—the one who looked like the purer of the two—bet that we had done it? Damn, girls were scary.

"Welp, I'm screwed! That's ten people I owe candies to now."

"You made the same bet with ten people?!"

"About two-thirds of the girls in our class wanted in. And here I was, thinkin' your virginity was still intact!"

"Your insult works on so many levels, and I hate it."

But yes, I was still a virgin. A virgin in awe of Takamiya's rabid intuition.

By the sounds of it, the majority had bet that Mashiro and I'd had our first experience together. How far did they think we'd actually gone? But then, thinking about how pheromonal Mashiro had been after summer vacation, I guess it was only natural for people to assume. I also thought I was as much a part of the furniture *since* dating Mashiro as I was before, but clearly I just hadn't noticed the attention I was getting.

"W-Wait, why does that mean we did it?" Mashiro said. "I never said what happened next. You can't say we didn't just talk and formed a spiritual connection... Think about that."

"Are you kiddin'? A young couple stay over in a room together, of course *something's* gonna happen!"

"Th-That's not... Wait..." Far from hiding behind her bangs like she usually did, Mashiro's eyes flew open, and she turned her demonic gaze on me.

"*You stayed overnight with Iroha-chan last night, right?!*"

“You’re bringing that up again?”

Much as this was a sensitive topic, I wished she’d at least given me some warning before I was expected to read her lips. She was lucky I’d been juggling so many secrets lately and was used to lip reading out of the blue like this.

“Hold up. Think about what you’re saying, and then remember that you also spent a night in my room with me.”

“I...guess that’s true.”

“Right? Logically speaking, there’s only one conclusion. Which is—”

“That day I crossed a line with you? Without realizing it?”

“Not even close.”

Mashiro needed to learn not to trust her own preconceptions. She got full marks on every literature test, and her Japanese was good enough to write novels, so why didn’t she understand this basic notion?

“Yo, check this out! They’re communicatin’ with looks, in that way only couples do! They’re keepin’ secrets from us, Kyouko-chin!”

“Th-That’s right, Asuka-chan. They’re so in love, it’s embarrassing to watch!”

“Damn, this is what bein’ a teen is all about!” Suzuki said. “I gotta make sure my girl feels loved too!”

Aaand our silent communication backfired. The *contents* of our conversation were kept secret of course, but it should’ve been obvious that people were going to see it as a sign of love when we were staring at each other like that. And being teased about it turned Mashiro’s face bright red.

“N-No, that’s... I mean, you’re right, but... Please don’t tease us!”

“Omigosh, you really *are* adorable, Tsukinomori-san! Look at *these*!” Takamiya exclaimed, poking relentlessly at Mashiro’s flaming cheeks.

“Stoop! You’re acting like an idiot right now.”

Though she was the one being bullied, Mashiro didn’t look or sound as annoyed as I thought she would. She’d even called Takamiya an “idiot” just then; insulted her.

I liked to think it was a sign that the two shells closed tight around her heart were trying to come apart, just enough to reveal the shining pearl within.

“So, did ya finally learn that you’re not so ordinary after all? And that people are actually jealous of you?”

“I take back everything I ever said about being an unsociable, out-of-place teenager. Sorry. Is that what you’re after, Ozu?”

“You get a conditional suspended sentence.”

“Meaning you’re not letting me off the hook, huh?”



Iroha

Senpai~



Iroha

Senpai!!!!!!



Iroha

Senpai :((((



Iroha

Senpai ;))))



Iroha

SENPAI (^ε^)- MWAH!!!



AKI

Stop that.



Iroha

Finally, a reply!



AKI

What's with the mindless spam?



Iroha

It's not *mindless*! I was calling your name while channeling every emotion under the sun (including love!)



Iroha

Koyagi users would kill for a voice pack this rare!



AKI

Funny you should call it a voice pack. All I see is text.



Iroha

Betcha you can practically hear me reading all these out loud!



Iroha

And it should sound just like my real voice!



Iroha

C'mon, engage your imagination. You can start to hear it now, right? My adorable voice...



AKI

...



Iroha

Look, I thought you'd be missing me on the trip, not being able to hear my voice and all.



AKI

Right.



Iroha

And because I'm such a good kouhai who cares about her senpai, I thought and thought and thought about how I could help you.



AKI

Hmm.



Iroha

This is what I came up with! Teasing you remotely over LIME!



Iroha

Even if we're far apart, I won't leave you all by yourself, Senpai!



AKI

[*.



Iroha

You totally just typed those characters at random! I bet you're using the swipe keyboard and not even looking at the screen!



Iroha

I know you just tried to type "OK." but you accidentally had it set to symbols! This isn't the first time!

AKI AKI
¥8.

 Iroha
You're seriously gonna switch to another keyboard to try and type it out again?!

AKI AKI
Foiled again. You should be a detective.

AKI IAKI
There is always only one truth!

 Iroha
Now I can really tell you're not engaging your brain, 'cause you're throwing out random anime references!

AKI AKI
Whoops, we're on the move.

AKI AKI
I'm out of charge too, so no more entertainment for you.

 Iroha
Whaaat?! I'm not here to be entertained!

 Iroha
I'm here to make sure you're okay, Senpai!

AKI AKI
See ya.

 Iroha
HEEEEEEEEEEEEEY! I'm not done talking!!!!!!!!!!

 Iroha
WAAA! STUPID SENPAI!

 Iroha
BIG IDIOT STUPID SENPAI!

Interlude: Sasara and Iroha

Today was not going to be an ordinary day. I, Tomosaka Sasara, didn't have any actual evidence, but I got this feeling about once a month—that it was a weird day.

It'd be something like, I wouldn't be able to log in to my social media like I did every morning, because of server problems. Or my horoscope in the morning news show would be bad. Or my makeup wouldn't go on properly. Stuff like that.

It was never anything big. Just something ordinary going a little wonky.

Usually it was just a hunch that turned out to be nothing, and the day would be as normal as any other. It was like my favorite editor Hoshino-san said: "Often, it isn't that anything is wrong with your surroundings; it's just the natural flux of your own life. Nothing to do with anything occult, like 'bad energy,' or the planets being misaligned. All you need to do is make sure you are in a good place at all times, and you'll stop worrying about stuff like that."

When a star came out with something like that, it was on another level! I had mad respect for her.

Now, Hoshino-san, I swear I've always believed that, but today things were different. I was *sure* today wasn't going to be an ordinary day.

It wasn't something minor that made me feel this way this time. It was a *major* difference, something anyone would notice the second they stepped into the classroom.

I finished my morning routine and made it to school with plenty of time to spare, which was when I saw Kohinata Iroha with her face buried in her desk and a gloomy vibe coming off her. She was whimpering quietly, but instead of being in pain, it was more like she was majorly frustrated about something. It was a physical thing, not a mental thing, but both were equally worrying.

I wasn't the only one who was worried either—I noticed other people glancing at her, like they wanted to check up on her but weren't sure if it'd be welcome.

Kohinata Iroha was a popular honor student, polite and cheerful, smiling no matter what. Anybody'd be worried when *she* got depressed. I mean, *I* was.

First, I'd need to get the deets about what was going on, so I

called out to some girls nearby.

“Heya. What’s up with Iroha?”

“Tomocchi, hi. We don’t have a clue either. Totally not okey-de-cokey.”

“I swear she’s never ever down.” I replied. “I kinda feel weird, not knowing what’s wrong. Like, I’m worried about her.”

“I know, right? I’m literally dying of worry.”

“Sasara, you’ve made friends with Kohinata-san recently, right? Go be there for her.”

“Okay, sure. I’ll be careful not to cross any lines, though.”

“Awesome, Tomocchi, you’re a real one!”

“I got this!” I fist-bumped the girl. It was like a toast, except with our fists.

There wasn’t any real meaning to our conversation, I just went along with what they said. The same went for the slang. Everyone just kinda started using the same words one day, and I kind of knew how to use them myself, but if I was honest, I still wasn’t totally sure what they all meant. Like, what was a ‘real one’?

You sometimes got these shows and stuff trying to explain the slang used by teenagers, and while they got some of the words, there were a lot that completely flew under the radar. I guess we had our own culture here, and it wasn’t that much of a big deal anyway.

Right now, I was more worried about Iroha. The girls were counting on me, and I *was* her best friend, so it was time for me to pitch in and help.

So I decided I’d go tack with her for lunch.

Lunch time came around, and I ended up on the school roof. The roof is off limits in a lot of schools nowadays, but Kouzai was one of the top in the area. The students were smart and had a high moral standard, so the teachers trusted us. It *could* just be that I was pulling up the school’s average, of course, but then I was the one using the roof right now, so it wasn’t like that mattered.

Iroha and I sat with our backs to the fence, using our handkerchiefs as picnic blankets, and opened our lunch boxes. Iroha wasn’t back to her usual self; she was as majorly gloomy as she’d been in the classroom. Talk about annoying.

“So, tell me what’s up. You can be yourself up here, since there’s no one else around, right?”

“Aww, but you’ve never had a boyfriend, Sasara, and you’re my age. I’d feel bad telling you all the tiny details of my love life.”

“You wanna start something?! And I could totally get a boyfriend if I wanted! There just aren’t any guys good enough around here!”

I needed a man who was *at least* 180 centimeters tall, had a TOEIC

score between 730 and 870, with perfect reflexes, and who knew how to make fun conversation. He didn't have to be a total looker or anything, as long as he had big eyes, good cheekbones, a nice hairstyle, and knew how to groom himself.

As long as he had all those things, I'd take an average Joe.

But none of the guys here ticked all those boxes, which was why I'd never had a boyfriend. If I compromised on a couple things, I could've easily landed one or two by now.

Huh? Wait a sec...

"Your love life? Is that where the trouble is?" I asked.

"Yup. And it's pretty serious."

"You're kidding. Did Ooboshi-senpai do something outta line?"

"He went off on a long romantic trip with some other girl, leaving his cute little kouhai behind," Iroha muttered in a sour tone, her cheeks puffed up.

A trip, huh? Weren't the second-years out on their class trip right now?

"Okay, so you're missing Ooboshi-kun right now. Didn't know you were that fragile."



Iroha sighed. "Yeah, Sasara. I know you've never been so in love that you've seriously missed someone like this. Sorry for asking for help when this is obviously too complex an issue for you."

"Gngh! What's with the extra hot comebacks today? I'm trying to lift your mood over here!"

"Yeah. You're getting burned like we're in the desert sun."

"Don't rub it in!"

Was she seriously bullying me through her depression? I guess it was a good sign she was still being herself, but you'd think she could stand to be a little nicer to her friend, right?

"Are you always like this when he's away, Iroha? If you're just gonna get depressed whenever Ooboshi-senpai's gone, you're gonna end up wasting a ton of time."

"I'm not a rabbit. I'm not gonna die of loneliness if Senpai leaves me alone for ten seconds."

"So how come you're all doom and gloom right now?"

"Well, it's like... It's 'cause it's a one-off school event, y'know?" Iroha mumbled through pursed lips, but it wasn't a proper answer to my question.

"Uh, I don't know, actually."

I had a reputation for being pleasant and mature, but even I was getting ticked off. There was nothing to hide, was there? Why couldn't she just spit it out?

Iroha intertwined her fingers and then pulled them apart again, over and over while she gathered her thoughts. Ten seconds later...

"It's like...more impactful at a time like this," Iroha said, looking up at the sky like there was nothing else she could do.

I looked up with her. There wasn't a cloud in the afternoon sky, making it look like it went on and on forever.

"No matter how far I climb, Senpai's always one step ahead. It feels like the second I get close to him, he just runs off again, far, far away."

"Well, duh. He's in the grade above."

"I just wish he'd get kept behind a year. Then we could be in the same class, and maybe we'd get to sit next to each other."

"Because that's not excessive at all."

"Hey, I know it's selfish. Who cares? It's not like it's hurting anyone to say it."

Meaning that was what she actually *wanted*? She had this look on her face like she knew it was a dumb thing to wish for, but that she'd totally go for it if someone handed her a magic lamp right now.

I guess she was *really* head over heels for Ooboshi-senpai.

I glanced at Iroha's face, which was still pointing upwards.

Suddenly, that scene from our high school entrance ceremony flashed in front of my eyes.

There were pink petals flying all around, and a gentle warmth in the air that'd put you right to sleep if you weren't careful. I remembered the pretty girl next to me, playing on her phone like she was bored out of her wits.

It was obvious she didn't care and was just killing time; she'd already passed the entrance exam with top marks, and there wasn't a lick of happiness or pride on her face. Not until the sound of those footsteps marking *his* arrival:

Ooboshi Akiteru. He looked like a totally average guy, and I forgot his face as soon as I saw it. But I *did* remember Iroha's, and I still could with total clarity. She had this excited smile as she raced up to him like a puppy greeting its owner.

Back then, I thought it was weird. Was getting into the same school as her beloved senpai really such a big deal? But now I'd seen how she was when he'd literally be back in less than a week, I could imagine how much she had missed him in the final year of junior high, where she was away from him for a whole year.

So like, she was being tortured just because he was a year ahead of her? Jeez, imagine what she'd be like if they actually started dating. I guess some people'd be happy with their partner being so needy, but I would literally die.

Thank God we were just friends.

"Uh, but you know what they say, right? Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Just hold on to that, and make the most of your time without him."

Damn, that was good. I was totally uploading that line to my Pinstagram story later! All I needed was a gorgeous pic to go with it, and I'd have *everyone* in tears! I could even make a whole album of wonderful quotes! Yup, I was definitely gonna ask Hoshino-san for her thoughts.

Iroha sure was lucky! Normally I'd charge a thousand yen for a quote like that, and here she was getting it for free! I grinned and glanced her way.

"Wanna be quiet for a sec? I'm in the middle of something."

"You're on your *phone*?!"

She totally wasn't listening! Was this really how she was gonna treat *me*, her *friend*?!

"Hello? We're s'posed to be having a heart-to-heart here! Are we friends or what?"

"Talking to Senpai on LIME is way more important! A true friend would realize that."

"You mean Ooboshi-senpai? Jeez, what a saint. Can't believe he's

sending you LIME messages when he's in the middle of his field trip."

Iroha let out a smug laugh. "Can you blame him? I'm sure he's dying to talk to me."

"Oh yeah, I'm sure. But hey, it's nice to be confident."

Iroha looked so loved-up as she typed back to her senpai that it was a wonder she didn't just turn into cotton candy on the spot. To think she was so down just a second ago, and all it took was a single message from Ooboshi-senpai to turn it all around. Talk about mood swings. There was no way I could keep up.

Her emotional whiplash was making me thirsty, so I poured myself some mineral water (it's good for your skin and body) from my flask, and took a sip.

"He replied right away after only a few messages!" Iroha announced.

"Wait, so you spammed him before he answered?"

"Yeah, but that's normal. I only sent him twenty."

"Pffft!"

There went my mineral water.

"Ew, Sasara, gross!"

"That was *your* fault!"

"How? You're the one who spat the water out."

"I swear, you're gonna make me snap! I wouldn't have spat *anything* out if you hadn't just told me you sent him *twenty* messages!"

"More than thirty, if we're counting stickers."

"You're a total stalker! You're totally obsessed!"

"Aw, come on, don't say that! It hurts twice as bad coming from an *actual* stalker."

"I'm *not* a stalker!"

I wasn't stubborn enough to be one. Now she was just being rude. Anyway.

I knew Iroha really liked Ooboshi-senpai, but I hadn't realized she had it *this* bad. She couldn't even resist teasing him from afar when they were apart. It just wasn't normal. Maybe she was being extra annoying to me today because of the frustration of not being able to pester Ooboshi-senpai in person. If so, Iroha might stay unhinged like this for the next few days...

"Well, y'know, it's like..." I started, putting an end to our pointless banter and looking back up at the sky. The vast fall sky that stretched on forever. I searched deep—*really* deep—inside my heart, and pulled out these words:

"It'll be nice when Ooboshi-senpai's back."

...because I don't know how long I can survive as Iroha's punching bag.

Chapter 2: We're Right Behind the Girl with a Crush on My Friend!

After the shinkansen had arrived at Kyoto station, we spent around twenty minutes on a bus that carried us through the city's traditional townscape. At the end was our hotel, standing loud and proud. It was designed to resemble a palace, and its historic appearance made you fully expect the musty scent of trees and shrubs that you get in old buildings—but there was no discoloration to be seen on its white walls, so in all likelihood it was built relatively recently.

In fact, when I looked it up online, I found it had only been built a few years ago and that it was highly popular among tourists. Not just for its gorgeous architecture, but for the quality of its natural onsen and for the variety of impressive recreational facilities. The biggest complaint among the reviews was that booking a stay was hard, which should be enough to tell you how fantastic this place was.

This was the first year any effort had gone into finding a hotel of this quality. Sumire, the teacher in charge of the Class Trip Committee, must have gone through hell and high water to organize a place like this for us.

I stepped off the bus, stretching. It hadn't been a long journey by any means, but enough for my body to stiffen up.

Mashiro was stifling a yawn. Takamiya had been harassing her the entire journey, taking away any chance she might have had to catch a nap. Looking at the rest of my group, the rabid Takamiya was the only one who looked energetic; Ozu and Suzuki weren't bothering to hide how exhausted they were. Actually, as my gaze moved on, I realized that Takamiya *wasn't* the only exception.

I was thinking about check-in when I felt a gentle poke at my back.

"Um, Ooboshi-kun... Can I talk to you?" a small, feminine voice asked.

"Huh? Oh, sure..."

It was Maihama. The color of her cheeks resembled the autumn leaves of the hotel's grounds, and she led me, beckoning, behind the bus.

We were on a class trip, her cheeks were red, and she'd brought me to this inconspicuous spot. Even the densest of men would know

what that combination of conditions meant.

"I-Is it okay if I ask you a favor, Ooboshi-kun?"

"Depends on what it is."

"The truth is, I've been hiding this secret from you for a long time now... It might be a bit shocking, so please try not to freak out."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'm sure it'll be fine. Go ahead."

"W-Well, um..." Maihama's cheeks flared, and her gaze kept falling towards the ground. Only when she'd gathered enough courage did she speak again. "I...like Kohinata-kun."

"Yeah, I know."

"What?!"

"Why did you think I didn't? Your friends are always pushing you to go talk to him in the classroom, right?"

"I thought you wouldn't know what that meant. You don't seem very...experienced at all."

"Uh, well. Can't argue with that."

"Because you seem a little dense. Enough that you don't really pay attention to your own relationship."

"Well, yeah. I guess things have been feeling a little...lackluster lately."

"You honestly seem like the geeky type, slightly arrogant, who throws away his best chances at romance as a teenager. Someone who ends up in his late thirties without ever having found a girlfriend, and who is then single for the rest of his life."

"You can stop now. You *are* pretending to be an airhead to pick a fight with me, right?"

"What? Of course not!" Maihama waved her hands in front of her desperately. She didn't seem to be lying either—did that mean she'd have kept on going if I hadn't stopped her? "S-Sorry, Ooboshi-kun. I hope I didn't offend you."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I argue with people a hundred times ruder than you on a daily basis. Nothing you say'll offend me."

I'd developed a thick skin, enough that I was probably at risk of an anaphylactic shock more than being offended.

"Okay, so you like Ozu. And you wanted a favor from me?"

"Oh, yes. Once we've dropped off our things in our rooms, we're going sightseeing right away, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

"Could you...try and make it so that Kohinata-kun and I are alone together? Without making it obvious?"

"You gonna confess?"

"E-Eek! U-Um... Yes. Well, I don't know if I'll be brave enough to actually do it, but I want to give it a try..."

"Right."

The class trip was already a major highlight of a high schooler's life, one that was all about enjoying your youth. For a girl in love like Maihama, it was also a time of competition, and she was already off to a flying start. There were a ton of girls interested in Ozu, but she had made it into the same class trip group as him, *and* she'd managed to enlist my help as his friend. She had made sure she was in a good position to pursue her goal.

I liked that: her persistence, her ability to chase her dream so hard it crossed the threshold of pure *greed*.

As for me, I'd worked myself to the bone to help Ozu fit in at school, and I'd always wanted him to find a girlfriend someday. Whether this would actually go anywhere was down to the two of them; it had nothing to do with me. But Ozu was my only friend, and I dearly wanted him to enjoy his youth to the fullest.

"All right. I'll try and make it happen."

"Really?! Thank you, Ooboshi-kun!"

"Can I involve other people in this too? Not Ozu, of course, but Mashiro or Suzuki, for example. It'll be easier to do this as a team rather than on my own."

"Um, well, I don't mind if you tell Tsukinomori-san..."

"Suzuki's out?"

"Suzuki-kun sort of seems like he'd blab... I'd hate for Kohinata-kun to find out I'm doing something so sneaky."

"Ah."

I understood completely. I pictured Suzuki, his every fiber brimming with muscle. I didn't think he was a *bad* guy by any means, but he definitely seemed like the type to run his mouth by accident.

"What about Takamiya? She's pretty talkative too."

"I guess I can trust her more than Suzuki-kun—she's my best friend, after all. And I know how she comes off, but Asuka wouldn't actually make a major slipup like that. She's got this instinct for avoiding drama."

"Oh. Yeah, I can see that." Even rabid dogs had good instincts. "All right. I'll get Mashiro and Takamiya to pitch in. I can't guarantee we'll pull this off, but I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you! I'll see you later, then!" Maihama clapped her hands together in thanks, then began to scamper away. She didn't get very far before she stopped and turned around. "I'm sorry for taking you away from your precious time with Tsukinomori-san. Let me know if you want some alone time with her after lights-out. I'll make sure Kageishi-sensei doesn't find you on her patrols!"

"You think you could stop assuming we're *that* depraved?"

"Don't worry! I wouldn't know the first thing about it!"

"Stop nodding sagely like you're some saint trying to respect our

privacy.”

She was gone before my quip could reach her.

I couldn't believe how eager she was for Mashiro and I to cross the line...

“I guess as a guy I'm better equipped to deal with suggestive stuff like that, but I'd hate for Mashiro to hear it.”

“Why's that?”

“It'd be awkward, obviously.”

“Awkward, huh? So exactly what kind of stuff *were* you talking about with her?”

“Why're you in a bad mood again? I'm just looking out for you, Ma...shi...”

“Hm? What's with the sudden stammering? You sound like a blocked exhaust pipe.”

“Mashiro?!”

She was just standing there, looking totally unimpressed. Where the heck did she come from?! And how long had she been there?! She was really nailing the crappy timing today. It was like there was some cosmic force preventing me from doing anything without enraging her.

“I saw you colluding with Maihama-san. Are you cheating on me?”

“N-No. Far from it.”

“We're on a class trip, her cheeks were red, and you were speaking in this inconspicuous spot.”

“I *know*, it's the perfect setup for a confession, right?! But she was actually asking for my help to confess to someone else.”

“This always happens in romantic comedies. The girl pretends to ‘practice’ confessing to you, but she's actually serious.”

“She didn't practice anything. She's into Ozu, and since I'm his friend, she asked me to make it so they could be alone together.”

“She pretends she's into your friend, so that she can end up in your harem. That's not unusual in romantic comedies either.”

“*You're* the one working on romantic comedy logic, treating every possibility as indisputable fact!”

“Shut up and prepare for your punishment.”

“No! I'm innocent! Look, this isn't going anywhere. How can I get you to believe me?” At a total loss, I had no choice but to whine.

Mashiro paused to think. “Act like a proper boyfriend. Show people, clearly, that we're a couple.” Her tone sounded frail, but I could hear the power within it, like a sturdy wire.

Mashiro's clear blue eyes vanished beneath their lids, and she puckered her lips like a chick waiting for food.

My heart lurched.

There was barely any distance between us. The tips of her hair were silky soft, and her lip balm made her lips shine. The gentle, sweet fragrance coming off her was enough to pull all thoughts from my mind.

But none of those things—the physical aspects which stimulated my masculine instincts from several angles—mattered right now. There was something more, something *mentally* stimulating: the fact that she was stripping herself of all defenses and coming in so close to me, proof that she trusted me utterly and completely. My eyes were transfixed on her lips as they waited for my kiss.

For a real, normal couple, this was an everyday thing. Something I should be able to do without freaking out, and without caring who might see us, if I wanted to fulfill my contract with Tsukinomori-san.

I just didn't know if I *should*.

I still didn't have a good grasp on my own emotions. Seeing Mashiro ready to kiss me was making my heart race, but I couldn't be sure if it meant I had feelings for her—because I'd had the same experience with Iroha.

This had to be a physical desire. Not something romantic.

I was a man of reason. It was embarrassing to think that I could fall victim to the misattribution of arousal; which is when someone thinks they are experiencing symptoms of arousal, when in fact their body is reacting to a life-threatening situation. Liking someone, *loving* someone, had to be something deeper and more human than a natural urge.

And that was why I couldn't kiss her.

But I couldn't reject her either.

My reaction had to be something affectionate, and something that fell within the bounds of our fake relationship.

"Mmh..."

I ran my fingers along the back of her neck.

"Wh-What's that? It tickles."

"I'm caressing you like a lover."

"What? Mm... Hey, that's...too much."

"I thought about what I could do. Kissing you on the lips, on the cheek, or patting your head. All of those seemed like they'd risk causing trouble for you."

"How?"

"Kissing you on the lips would ruin your lip balm. On your cheek, and it would ruin your makeup. Patting your head would mess up your hair. We're gonna be heading out soon, and I didn't want to make you have to redo everything. You got mad at me about that before."

Somebody out here was reflecting, improving, and constantly

making progress. Yup, you guessed it—*me*. I wasn't about to make the same mistake twice!

I couldn't hold back my smile. I'd totally nailed the whole "perfect communication" thing this time!

"Hmph."

Wait... Mashiro?

Making that choice in a dating sim would have increased her affection for sure, so clearly I was just *imagining* that her reaction was negative.

Right?

"Sweating'd ruin my makeup anyway."

"Sweating?"

"I was nervous. So I was sweating. Do I really have to explain that to you? Go jump off a cliff." Mashiro landed a feeble punch to my stomach. "But I get it, you weren't cheating on me. So I'll let you off."

Whew.

"So, Maihama-san wants a chance to confess to OZ..."

"Huh? Since when do you shorten Ozu's name like that?"

"Oh... I guess I picked it up from you. I mean Kohinata-kun, yeah. Kohinata-kun. That was close... I was being way too familiar..."

"What? I can't hear you when you mumble like that."

"Shut it! Look, all I have to do is help Maihama-san and Kohinata-kun have a moment alone, right?"

"Yeah. We just need to cooperate a little to make it happen. If you've got any ideas on how to do that, I'm all ears."

"It's easy. I've got it all worked out." Mashiro puffed her chest out proudly.

"I'm glad I asked you then! What's the plan?"

"The plan...is a secret."

"You're kidding?" Suddenly, I was disappointed.

But Mashiro shot me a devilish grin, a far cry from her usual innocence.

"I'll tell you everything when the time comes."

"Iroha *again*?"

My phone had buzzed several times in my pocket as I sat on the hard, cheap seats in the back of the taxi and gazed out the window. I was busy trying to take in the sights of this country's former capital and bask in my homesickness, but clearly Iroha was intent on ruining the atmosphere.

Right now, we were heading to our first sightseeing stop. Each group was following a different route and traveling in these cabs, which could easily navigate the city's tight turns. The taxi company

arranged by the school (by which I mean Sumire) was happy to transport all the groups at the same time, leaving little scope for disorganization. Honestly, it seemed a bit excessive for a class trip, so I could only imagine it was a result of the usually dominating Sumire switching on the charm for once.

To be clear, even though we were moving in groups, they weren't stuffing a mix of boys and girls into the same taxi, away from adult supervision—not that you'd even get six people in one of these cars. Well, maybe if we were going in one of those new bigger taxis designed for numbers. That might have been better, but those were still considered specialist, so I doubt the company had enough stock to supply for us all at the same time.

I sighed. We were on a class trip, and here I was analyzing some random company's resources. I was starting to annoy myself, so I turned my attention to Iroha's message—even though I knew it would probably be something annoying and pointless.

Iroha: Wow, Kyoto sure is a pretty city, right, Senpai?

What?

I had to read it again.

My plan was just to leave her on read if she had nothing interesting to say, but now she had me curious, dammit!

AKI: Stop trying to bait me. The school day's not even over yet. There's no way you could be here.

Iroha: Are you *sure* there's no way? I'm watching you right now, y'know!

AKI: Stop making stuff up, dumbass.

Iroha: Ozuma's sitting right next to you. The driver is in the driver's seat. Then there's some guy I don't know, but I'm guessing he's in your class?

AKI: ?!

I snapped my head up from my phone and looked around the taxi's interior.

"Whoa, check out these roads! They're super straight! Like a ruler!" muscle man Suzuki cried from the passenger seat, excited.

"Kyoto's roads were built on a grid pattern system. Not perfectly, though; there are several places where the temples or nature of the land itself made it impossible to build along straight lines," the Ozupedia responded next to me, in top working condition.

Iroha had everything a hundred percent correct.

Okay. I needed to calm down. Reread what Iroha wrote, and figure this out. There had to be some sort of trick to this.

AKI: You're not fooling me. All you'd need to know is that we're traveling by taxi, and how many people are in here, and a monkey could work that much out. You don't need to be able to see anything to know that Ozu is sitting next to me!

Iroha: Look out the window! I'm in the car right next to you! Over here~

AKI: Yeah, I'm not falling for that no matter what you say. You're obviously bullshitting me.

I finished typing and glanced out the window—just in case.

We were just being overtaken by another taxi. My eyes locked with the elderly woman sitting inside. She gave me a dignified smile and a polite nod.

See, Iroha? You *were* bullshitting.

With a triumphant smile on my face, I turned back to my phone.

Iroha: You totally just looked out the window~

AKI: You already knew I would!

Iroha: Yeah, because you were hoping you might just see my adorable face and get to say hi!

Iroha: Mwa ha ha ha! Too bad! I'm back at home! I'm so sorry to get your hopes up~

AKI: Stop being an idiot and focus on school. I'm running out of charge, and I'm not gonna waste it replying to you anymore.

After hitting send, I changed my LIME notification settings to stop my phone from vibrating when I received a message.

And then I sighed, bringing my attention back to the printed class trip schedule. *This* was what I needed to focus on: the class trip. I couldn't let Iroha's remote teasing get to me, or I'd be wasting this rare opportunity.

"Kinkaku-ji, Ryouan-ji, Fushimi Inari-taisha..." I read out the tourist spots in the order we were going to see them. "That's a pretty inefficient route, especially since we're supposed to be seeing them all in one afternoon."

There was too much time dedicated to travel, leaving much less time for each location.

I heard a chuckle from the seat next to mine.

"It's not like you to just accept a plan like this one, Aki."

“I definitely would’ve pointed out how much wasted time there is if you’d asked the old me.”

“But you wouldn’t anymore?”

“I know the girls are keen on seeing all these places, so I don’t think it’s right of me to say something.”

“Huh. I didn’t know you were capable of being as soft as the average person.”

“D’you think I’m a robot or something? Anyway, it all depends on how you look at it; these three spots are the must-see tourist spots in Kyoto, three places you’ve *got* to have photos of. The most efficient thing would be to go see spots that are close to the hotel, but if they’re just gonna be lackluster, then it’s way better to go to all the places people actually *want* to go.”

“Man, you really have changed in these past six months, Aki.”

“This is supposed to be a fun, relaxing trip. I’m not gonna be able to relax if I’m harping on about how inefficient everything is.”

“Aha ha ha. I guess that’s true.”

Ozu’s response was simple, but it was much more than it seemed: it came from all the months and years we’d spent together. Both of us had started out as problem children. But our activities with the Alliance, with Mashiro and everybody else, had helped us to make significant progress. At least, I hoped so...

That was why I was confident I still had scope to change going forward. I wanted to make the most of this trip. If nothing else, I firmly believed that if I faced my private life head-on right now, romance and youth and all, then perhaps having fun now could lead to positive change down the line.

“Ah...”

I found myself glancing out the window at the taxi in the next lane over. It had been driving a small distance behind us for most of the trip, but now it had caught up. My eyes met those of the girl sitting in the passenger seat and staring out of the window. It was Mashiro.

She glanced at Maihama and Takamiya before giving me a covert wave.

I was worried how Mashiro would cope, shy as she was, traveling in a small vehicle with two classmates she barely knew, but it looked like she was doing fine; she didn’t look too anxious. Her timid wave put a smile on my face as I returned the gesture—making sure Ozu and Suzuki wouldn’t see.

I wasn’t in the mood for being teased.

Our first stop was Kinkaku-ji: the Temple of the Golden Pavilion.

Once we were out of the taxi, we met up with the girls, and then followed the charming tree-lined path through the main gate.

The path was thronged with tourists, but they weren't enough to block the view of the gorgeous belfry to our left and the oak trees, as though the path had been specifically laid out with the surrounding scenery in mind.

Ah, whoops. I'd started analyzing stuff like the layout of this place again. Call it occupational disease; there wasn't much I could do to help it.

It might be difficult to wrap your head around this if you're not in game development yourself, but games are carefully planned to make sure even players who come in blind can be sucked into the world. Even the first menu you see, which might not seem like much, is designed to be intuitive in terms of which options are placed where, and other design choices coax you to want to spin the gacha without a second thought.

Then there's the game map, which lets you get lost just enough to stoke excitement, and gives you just the right amount of hints that you're not getting frustrated and giving up. This is where game design technique comes surprisingly close to the know-how required to build theme parks and tourist spots.

Koyagi still had a long way to go in its development. There was a lot I could learn from the first-rate techniques that went into the historical sites and theme parks that had been going strong for countless years.

I guess thinking about this kind of stuff counted as a part of my private affairs too.

"There's the pavilion! Ooboshi, shoot for us!"

The famous building we had all been waiting for came into view at the end of the path. The most delicious slice of the Kinkakuji pie: the Golden Pavilion. Even from where we stood on the other side of the pond, we could clearly see the majesty of the building, covered in glittering gold leaf.

Takamiya used her sharp, feral vision to pinpoint some tourists who had finished taking photos, and she promptly grabbed and pulled Mashiro and Maihama over to the now-empty spot after thrusting her phone into my hand. The message was clear: she expected me to get a photo of the three of them.

Takamiya was in the middle, her arms around Mashiro on her right and Maihama on her left, and her hands flashing two peace signs. I positioned her phone, ready to take the shot—but then I hesitated.

I had no idea how to use this thing.

I was used to testing out all kinds of functions when it came to

video game debugging, but a camera was a whole other beast. There were a ton of options here that I'd never seen in my life.

Picking up on my struggles, my trusty best friend stepped up beside me.

"With these phones, you usually need to tap on this icon here, then bring everything into focus like this."

"Oooh, that's looking good."

"Also, it depends on the settings, but—oh, no, these look fine. Now you just gotta press the button on the side here to take the photo. It'll automatically correct for any instability, so you should get a nice shot."

"Got it. Okay, I'm gonna take it, guys."

"Gotcha! Yeeeah!" Takamiya cried, excited.

"Y-Yeah..." Mashiro timidly tried to match her enthusiasm.

Click.

Ozu was right; the very first shot was perfect. The latest smartphones were really something. While I used phones regularly as part of my development work, this was making me realize how inexperienced I was with them in a normal context.

Ozu was just like me, in that he rarely took photos, but Ozu was also Ozu—he knew his stuff when it came to technology. He was in charge of *Koyagi's* programming and game design, so everyone ("everyone" being our user base) assumed he was a programmer, but that wasn't actually true.

Ozu was an engineer, in every sense of the word. More than that, I would go so far as to call him an inventor. He had a good understanding of all kinds of devices, because he would actively research anything that piqued his curiosity or interest.

"How's this?"

"Lemme see... Yup, it's perfect! Damn, you're good, Ooboshi! I'll send this to Kyouko-chin and Mashiro-chin too!"

As long as Takamiya was satisfied with the result, that was all that mattered. She was even calling Mashiro "Mashiro-chin" instead of "Tsukinomori-san," and Mashiro's lack of objection must have meant it had been agreed by all parties. That taxi ride must have brought them closer.

"Now we're gonna get a super cute shot of Mashiro-chin and Ooboshi together! Yeah!"

And now I was getting dragged into this.

They were *too* close! They must have jumped up a hundred friendship levels if Takamiya was fine making us do cutesy couple stuff like this!

"H-Hey, quit pushing me! We're in public."

"Y-Yeah, it's embarrassing!" Mashiro said. "I don't want to...be all

flirty in front of all these people.”

“Yeah, you’re being too pushy,” I added. “Wait, Mashiro-san, is it just me, or are you literally not doing anything to stop this?”

“I’m not strong enough to fight back...”

“No, what I mean is, you’re not putting up any resistance *at all*! Even a jellyfish floating through the sea’d put up more of a fight than this.”

“Don’t mention jellyfish. That’s what the bullies used to call my mom in high school because of her shiny hair...” Mashiro mumbled.

“What, so they bullied your mom instead of you? And how come this is the first time I’ve heard about this?!”

Takamiya and Maihama were crowding us on either side, giving us no means of escape. Our struggle—if you could call it that—was completely fruitless, and now we were right in the camera’s firing line.

“It’s literally a single photo! Why are you girls getting so excited?” I sighed in exasperation.

Maihama stepped back from us and said, “It’s not every day a couple gets to go on a class trip. You definitely need a lovely photo to commemorate the occasion!”

“Is it really that big a deal?”

“It’s a major deal! Now hurry up and smile!” Takamiya said, before Maihama had a chance to do anything; somehow, Takamiya was already set up in the perfect spot to take the shot.

How the hell did she get there that fast? How the hell could she hear my question from all the way over there? The more I discovered about her, the more my suspicions that she was some kind of wild animal were confirmed.

Now the girls were out of shot, and it was just me and Mashiro (the picture-perfect couple) pushed together in the center of the frame. When I looked down, I could see Mashiro’s head, slightly downcast.

Feeling awkward, I opened my mouth. “Mashiro, I’m sor—” and then I closed it again.

I was on the cusp of apologizing. Apologizing for being in her personal space. Apologizing for these girls teasing us and taking our picture. But if I did that, wouldn’t it sound like I was saying I didn’t *want* us to have this photo together?

I didn’t personally see any value in taking photos on a trip, and in the first place, I hated being photographed. But to Mashiro, who had feelings for me, this photo might well be important: something lovely to commemorate the occasion, as Maihama had put it.

So I tucked away my “sorry” and came up with something else.

“Do you like having your photo taken?”

“Yeah...” Though Mashiro’s gaze was directed bashfully at the ground, there wasn’t a hint of doubt in her tone.

“I’m glad. How’s my pose?”

“Lame.”

“I’ve never really done this before. I dunno how to pose other than making a peace sign.”

“Which is lame. But I like it...” Mashiro admitted, making a peace sign of her own.

If she liked it that much, it would’ve been nice if she’d kept the “lame” part to herself.

I followed Mashiro’s lead, posing like she did. I could hear (and feel) the whispers and glances of the tourists walking past.

“Aww, they’re so cute!”

“Are they really a couple? She looks way outta his league...”

It was embarrassing. But I was happy to put up with the embarrassment if it meant Mashiro would have some fond memories of our class trip.

“Nice! I got the perfect shot! I’ll send it over LIME later.”

Takamiya used burst mode, popular among teenage girls, to take a ton of photos in mere seconds, and then I was finally set free from my embarrassment.

It was strange how nervous I felt just over getting my picture taken. I was still sweating. Mashiro too, apparently—when she stepped back from me, she started fanning herself with her hand.

She glanced at me, and then whispered in my ear. “Aki.”

“Yeah?”

“This is our chance.”

“Ah... Oh, yeah.”

I knew right away what Mashiro was getting at. Few things were more romantic than having your photo taken with somebody in front of the gorgeous Golden Pavilion—especially since Mashiro and I, the established couple in this situation, had just set the precedent. Setting up a photo shoot with Ozu and Maihama here should be easy.

The only problem was that Maihama had asked me not to be too obvious. And Ozu was perceptive—the bar for “not obvious” was sky-high when it came to him. He’d pick up on what was happening the second one of us pushed too hard.

But that didn’t take away from the (literal) goldenness of the opportunity. I was confident I could pull this one off!

“Hey, you guys havin’ a secret meeting about Kyoko-chin’s deal?”

True to her wild ways, Takamiya sniffed out our collusive chat and padded over.

You know, it’s probably kind of rude to keep on with the whole

“rabid animal” shtick when it comes to her. Sorry, Takamiya.

“We’re thinking about getting them to pose for a photo together.”

“Oho.”

“I think now’s the perfect chance, so long as we keep it natural. Otherwise, Ozu is gonna notice.”

“You’re totally right! I was thinkin’ the exact same thing. All right; leave this to me!”

“Wait—”

“Yo! Kohinata!”

From zero to sixty in 0.0001 seconds, she was gone before I even had time to register the bad feeling in my stomach.

Takamiya fetched Maihama and shoved her along like a sumo wrestler towards Ozu, who was taking a photo of the pavilion a small distance away.

“You two should totally get a photo together!”

“I’ve seen more casual murder trials!”

The modern-day clown clearly hadn’t evolved past the days of the medieval jester, as spectacularly proven by Takamiya just now. Or maybe it was Opposite Day, and when I said, “keep it natural,” Takamiya heard, “Please make it a hundred percent clear to Ozu that we are trying to set them up.”

“This is natural! This is how nature works! The bold animals are the ones who get the mates!”

“Here I am trying to erase my negative opinions of you, and you’re just trying to drill them in further!”

I was trying to convince myself that she *wasn’t* rabid or animalistic, and now she was talking about the laws of nature...

“Hm?” Having noticed the commotion, Ozu turned around. He must have heard what we were talking about; he faced us with his gentle, princely smile. “You’d like to get a photo of the two of us, Maihama-san?”

Maihama’s face lit up. “Y-Yes!”

I couldn’t believe how easily he went for it. It was somehow both disappointing *and* a relief that we hadn’t needed to come up with an elaborate plan in the end. I guess human wisdom really was too shallow to stand up against the innate laws of nature. Perhaps Takamiya’s wild ways were justified after all.

I was busy standing in awe at the powerlessness I now realized afflicted the whole of mankind, when an impact around my shoulder pulled me off-balance.

“Wh— Ozu? What are you doing?!”

“Weren’t you listening? Maihama-san said she’d get a photo of us, so that we’d always remember the time we best friends went on a class trip together.”

“Huh?!”

Hold up a sec—how did *this* happen? Sure, Ozu never specified who he meant by “the two of us,” but he was talking to Maihama, so you’d think he meant the two of *them*.

Look, Ozu, Maihama looks totally confused. The same way people do when your conversational skills encounter an error. Read the room, then use that to inform your communication choices...

I was aware that expecting Ozu to pull it all off perfectly was unfair.

“Wait, isn’t that what you meant, Maihama-san?”

“Oh, no, I’ll...I’ll...take...the...photo...” Maihama said, sounding like a text-to-speech program at half speed as she readied her smartphone. The light of life was gone from her eyes.

With one arm slung over my shoulder, Ozu made a peace sign with his other hand.

It’d only make him suspicious if I made a fuss now, so I looked at the camera with a strained smile, and made the same peace sign.

“Smile,” Maihama commanded flatly, her eyes glazed over. With her brain disconnected from its emotional control center, she pressed the shutter like a melancholic marionette.

Once she’d taken the photo, Ozu examined her phone and gave a contented nod. “Looks good. Thanks, Maihama-san.”

“You’re...welcome.” Maihama responded with a mechanical bow, seeing Ozu off as he headed for the next spot. Her neck creaking like a rusty gate, she turned to look at Mashiro, Takamiya, and me. “How...did...it...end...up...like...that?”

Sorry, Maihama...

Next up was Ryouan-ji, the Temple of the Dragon at Peace.

We walked through the grounds, garnished by the autumnal colors of the trees, and we were greeted by a monk when we reached the temple itself. The atmosphere here was completely different compared to the magnificent Golden Pavilion, because this temple focused on the values of Zen. It was almost intimidating, or at the very least, it made me feel a little on edge.

I glanced over at the others to make sure I wasn’t the only one.

Mashiro was obviously nervous, her arms moving in tandem with her legs as she walked like a tin man. Takamiya was holding back on her instinctual noisiness—so much so that sweat was pouring down her face. Suzuki’s muscles seemed to be deflating. Maihama was...the same as ever. Paying more attention to Ozu than to her surroundings. Not even the ancient teachings of Zen could stand up against the power of love.

We followed the monk down the wooden external corridor and arrived at the temple's zen garden, a world heritage site. There was something mysterious about gazing at the lines of white sand and pebbles of varying sizes from that outer corridor, like we were looking at a painting instead of something that was right in front of us.

Ryouan-ji's rock garden was famous as a dry landscape garden, and it was said that its popularity skyrocketed after it had been praised by the Queen of England. There was no doubt that having something promoted by an influential figure was a hugely effective method of advertising, but it was meaningless if those words of praise were bought or superficial. The admiration had to be genuine; heartfelt. And the only way to earn that heartfelt admiration was for the product in question to stand on its own as an attractive, quality item. It had to have *charm* before it was brought to said influential person, and only then would it have the power to become popular.

The same was as true for tourist spots as it was for video games. I wanted to introduce Sasara to *Koyagi*, and for her to love it. Then, we could extend our reach into the female demographic, and—

There I go again. I just couldn't keep my mind from wandering over to my work.

I shook my head and switched back to tourist mode. I looked up, and was immediately startled by the face of the person approaching me.

It was a red-haired girl in the Kouzai uniform. The uniform was worn slovenly and without respect for the meditative environment she was in.

"Otoi-san?"

"Oh, hey, Aki. 'Sup." Otoi-san approached me, waving a lazy hand.

"Hi. Your group came here too, huh?"

"At a different time, though. We're done here and gonna be headin' off now."

"Oh, right. I guess it would be too convenient if we matched up perfectly, huh? By the way, you should really stop that."

"Hm?"

"That. Get it out of your mouth. It's rude."

"Oh, this?" The stick in Otoi-san's mouth wriggled up and down as she moved it with her tongue. It was her favorite kind of candy: a Suckie lollipop.

Otoi-san was lackadaisical about the rules at the best of times, but I didn't think even she would risk eating at a temple. As a friend, it was my duty to say something.

"I dunno what you're thinkin', but this ain't candy."

"Huh?"

“Look.” Otoi-san grabbed the stick between two fingers and popped it out of her mouth. The tip was a little wet from her saliva, but otherwise there wasn’t any candy on it, or even the glisten of a sugar granule. It wasn’t a lollipop at all; it was just a stick. “I already ate this lollipop, ’n’ then cleaned the stick. The monk at the front checked it for me. He was cool with it when I said it was an accessory.”

“R-Right...”

This was a situation that had arisen from a combination of Otoi-san’s mysteriously strong powers of persuasion, and her eccentric desire to bring a completely clean lollipop stick onto temple grounds. I doubted there was anyone out there who’d want to mimic her behavior. Otoi-san was weird enough to be a fictional character, and any kid in their right mind knew how to separate fiction from reality, and that the former didn’t always teach decent lessons.

All right then. Looks like I’ve covered myself.

“Why are you sucking on a clean stick then?”

“I dunno. Just want somethin’ in my mouth.”

“You make it sound like you’re trying to give up smoking.”

She was what, sixteen? Seventeen? I’d tell her to act her age, but I knew I didn’t have a leg to stand on in *that* discussion.

“D’you wanna try?”

“No.”

“You don’t hafta be polite, y’know.” Otoi-san took the stick from her mouth and moved it towards mine. Her face was totally blank (because she didn’t possess any of the more delicate emotions) as she threatened me with the indirect kiss.

“Y-You’re really doing this? Right in front of our classmates?”

She was way closer than she needed to be. We’d known each other since junior high school, and she was always “communicating” with me in overly direct ways like this, uncaring about the fact that I was a boy and she was a girl. It never bothered me enough to complain when we were in her studio, or otherwise alone together—but we were in public right now, and it was inevitable that someone would see us and get the wrong idea.

The stick came closer, glistening with saliva in the light. I shrunk back, trying to think of a way to avoid it.

But then, it stopped. Of its own accord.

Just before it reached my mouth, a slender, pale finger had appeared to hold back its infiltration.

“Otoi-san. Your group’s ready to leave. I don’t think you should keep them waiting much longer.”

It was Mashiro. Though she’d delivered her line calmly, her tone and eyes betrayed her wrath.

"Tsukinomori. 'Sup."

"Not 'sup.' Go back to your group. Now."

"Did I do somethin' to trigger you or what? What's the problem?"

"Don't be dumb! You're not going out with Aki, so don't act like you are!"

"C'mon, chill a little, yeah? Me and Aki would literally never date anymore. You don't hafta be jealous."

"Anymore?"

"Aaall right, we're done here! If you wanna talk, go do it where we're not blocking the other tourists, okay?" I stepped in before the conversation could go any farther down the wrong path. I pushed Otoi-san away, out of Mashiro's warpath. Also, Otoi-san was the one always going off on people for triggering *her*, so I wasn't particularly impressed with her purposely upsetting Mashiro in the same way.

Mashiro must have sensed I was trying to put an end to this conversation, because I could feel her gaze piercing into my back, and it was at a dissatisfaction rate of eighty percent.

Otoi-san picked up on Mashiro's discontentment too, turning her head slightly in my fake girlfriend's direction while I pushed her.

"Sorry for makin' things awkward. Lemme throw you a bone."

"A bone."

"This place is famous for reflectin' wabi-sabi. Y'know, acceptance of imperfection and stuff." Otoi-san's expression didn't change as she explained, save for the subtle, mischievous curl of her lip. "Since you're here, y'might wanna study up on it. It's the kinda thing that'll help you stop gettin' so cranky and jealous all the time."

Mashiro's face burned red.

My face turned sheet-white.

"Why are you trying to make her mad?! Go back to your group already!"

"Sure," Otoi-san replied lazily, before finally disappearing.

All she'd done was show up, cause trouble, and leave. What exactly were her motivations?

"Aki... Was there something between you and Otoi-san in the past?"

"Let's not think about the past. Right now we should focus on enjoying the temple."

"You're dodging the question."

"Right now we should focus on enjoying the temple."

"You can't get out of this by pretending you're an NPC. I'm not as easy to throw off track as Midori-san."

"Ngh... You really are way too stubborn. Look, Otoi-san and I never had the kind of relationship you're thinking of."

"Don't tell me what you *thought* it was. I want the truth."

As I faltered, Ozu came to the rescue.

"I guess I'll explain, then." Ozu's eyes softened as memories of the past played out over the quiet elegance of the world heritage site in front of us. "It all started in junior high school. Aki and Otoi-san were both loners."

"Are you seriously gonna tell her this story, Ozu?"

It wasn't something I particularly wanted to relive—and I was fairly confident Ozu didn't want to relive it either.

All eyes were on Ozu: Mashiro's, Maihama's, Takamiya's, and Suzuki's. Ozu put a secretive finger to his lips and smiled mischievously. "Aki was violent back then, unruly, and he often had beef with Otoi-san. Their conflict made the classroom a dangerous place to be."

"Aki was violent?" Mashiro looked at me as though she couldn't believe it, and I didn't blame her.

Junior high was just around the time she and I fell out of contact; there was no way for her to know what I was like then, or what I was up to. Whatever she imagined, "violent" was probably low on the list of possibilities, considering these days I pretty much blended in with the wallpaper.

"So what happened between them?" Mashiro asked.

"A lotta stuff. And then..."

Mashiro leaned forward, eager to discover more about the block of my past she knew nothing about. Like a man retelling an urban legend, Ozu left a dramatic pause, letting a confident smile rest on his lips as he prepared the final bombshell.

"Aki and I formed a special relationship. The end."

"Between the lack of detail and poor word choice, you're leaving way too much up to the imagination," I remarked, bringing a karate chop down on Ozu's head.

"At least everything I said was true."

"A conman doesn't have to explicitly lie to fool people."

"I'm not a conman, though. And we *do* have a special relationship." Ozu put one arm around my shoulder and brought his face close to mine, causing a sudden stir among the girls.

"Oooh! Oh, man! So that's how it is between you two, huh?!"

"W-Wait, does this mean...I never stood a chance?"

"A-Aki, you can't. *I'm* your girlfriend. Not OZ!"

Takamiya was excited.

Maihama was devastated.

Mashiro was flustered.

And all three of them were staring at us, their various emotions blazing in their eyes.

"N-No, that's definitely *not* what he means," I said.

“Hey, no judgment here, Ooboshi. You see that kinda love in nature too. I’m right behind you guys!”

“I definitely didn’t see this coming...but I suppose if Kohinata-kun’s happy, then I’m happy too.”

“I sure hope you’ve got a way to get us outta this, Ozu, or it’s gonna get out of hand...” I whispered in Ozu’s ear.

Ozu grinned and winked at me. “Aha ha ha. Either way, it got Tsukinomori-san off your back, right?”

“I guess that’s true, but...” I was about to protest further when I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Yes?” I turned around.

A monk was standing stock still behind me, smiling serenely. At first I thought he was giving me a thumbs-up, before he thrust that thumb towards the exit. He moved his lips, producing no sound, but making his message nice and clear.

You are being too loud. Please leave.

“We’re really sorry.”

There was nothing else for me to say. He was right.

After getting kicked out of the temple, I managed to explain things and clear up the misunderstanding while we were on the way to our next destination. I wouldn’t usually care what other people thought of me, but I didn’t feel like I could leave it alone with Maihama there.

She really liked Ozu, and had gone back and forth for ages before deciding to ask for my advice. I couldn’t trample all over her heart just so that Mashiro would stop asking about my past. We hadn’t yet managed to create a situation where the two of them could be alone; that would be my goal at the next spot, the Fushimi Inari-taisha.

At least, that *was* true, at the time.

No matter how things turned out, I want to put on the record that I *had* been determined to try.

...

So let me apologize now.

I’m sorry, Maihama.

I swear I had no way of knowing that it would end up being the *last* thing on my mind...

“You’re always going on to me about supporting my love life, and now it’s your turn...”

“Wait, Aki. You can’t just tell me how things are gonna end up before you’ve told the actual story.”

“Maybe, but you already had a hunch that something big was gonna happen, right?”

“Honestly? Yeah, you’re right.”

Chapter 3: My Friend(?)’s Little Sister Has It in For Me!

It wasn’t quite the afternoon, and it wasn’t quite the evening; the clear blue sky was tinged with dusky ocher. We arrived at the shrine, the Fushimi Inari-taisha, between those two worlds. There was this *feeling* in the air, as though something could break out at any time as we got out of the taxi.

Another two taxis were dropping off one of the other groups nearby. Students wearing the familiar uniform filtered out one after the other, but I didn’t pay them much attention.

Not until I noticed there was a familiar face among them.

“Oh, hey. Fancy seeing you here.”

The girl’s ponytail, tied up with a ribbon, jerked once as I called out to her, and then she turned around.

“Huh? O-Ooboshi-kun?”

It was Midori, the honor student I was running into a *lot* today. Her voice cracked as she acknowledged me. Clearly her leadership skills weren’t confined to the classroom, as she was very much walking at the head of her group of six.

When I spoke to her, her face flush beet red, and she started looking flustered. I must’ve spooked her, which shattered her authority so that it floated away in tiny pieces on the wind.

“Sorry, I probably should’ve just let you get on with it.”

“Y-Yes, you should have! For the very same reason it is inappropriate for your lover to show up uninvited at your place of work!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m sorry.”

“Good.” Midori sighed. “I’m glad you understand. My group members are in a hurry, you see. Aren’t you, everyone?”

“Nah, we’re good.”

“Keep talking, Midori-san!”

“You can do it!”

“Huh?!”

None of her group looked like they were in a hurry *at all*. Almost like they’d rather hang around here and watch her talk with me. I’d picked up on a similar trend back when I helped out the drama club—like they respected Midori, and loved her like she was their mascot or something, but they didn’t take her entirely seriously.

And these guys were supposed to be in the advanced class? They sure didn't look like they gave much of a damn. Maybe this happened to every group Midori was in charge of. If so, she might actually make a good president. I somehow got the feeling her country would be a really peaceful one.

"I see you chose to come to this shrine at the end of the afternoon. Excellent choice, Midori-san."

"Oh? You mean to say you purposely chose this time too, Ooboshi-kun?"

"Ah, well, it wasn't actually my idea—"

"It was mine," Mashiro mumbled.

Mashiro's sudden appearance had Midori panicking all over again. She flailed her hands in front of herself.

"Y-You've got the wrong idea, Tsukinomori-san! I wasn't trying to steal Ooboshi-kun away from you or anything!"

"I know. You're on my side. Aren't you?"

"O-Of course I am!" Midori let out a dry, nervous laugh.

Mashiro studied her a moment longer before losing interest and looking up at the huge succession of torii arches. Spreading her arms wide, she spoke almost mystically. "Dusk shows the Fushimi Inari-taisha in a light like no other. There is nothing more insanely deep than the torii corridor against the sky, burning scarlet! It's...awesome."

"Yes! Yes, that is exactly the reason I picked this time to come and see it!"

"I've used this shrine as a setting in my stories," Mashiro explained, "but this is the first time I've visited. I was really excited to see it with my own eyes."

"I can empathize!" Midori said. "I remember reading about the torii corridor, bathed in crimson, in Makigai Namako-sensei's *Snow White's Revenge Classroom: The Hellish Class Trip*, and it really struck a chord with me. I decided then that I would come and see it at dusk. And you say you've used it in your own stories, Tsukinomori-san?"

"W-W-Well, you can find common tropes between any two books. Especially when that trope is a gorgeous setting like this one!"

"That makes sense, of course! You know, from the way the conversation was going, I almost thought you were about to tell me that *you* are Makigai Namako-sensei."

"O-Of course not. He's a hit author. He's not just gonna be some random student at your school."

"Yes, you're right." Midori laughed. "Sorry, that was quite the conclusion to jump to."

"No. *I'm* sorry."

I couldn't for the life of me follow their conversation, but Mashiro

and Midori seemed to be bonding well over the similarities in their class trip plans. Apparently both of them saw the beauty in this place.

I pretended to be unconcerned while they chatted, but when they mentioned reading about this place in Makigai Namako-sensei's work and the scene in question came back to me, I couldn't deny I got just a *little* excited.

"You have a good eye for aesthetics, Midori-san," Mashiro said.

Midori giggled. "I'm not sure you've ever complimented me like that before. I feel a little bashful now!"

"People who deserve compliments should be complimented, and people who deserve punishment should be punished. That's what I think. And not many people would think to come here at a time like this."

"You really need to get the timing perfect, else it will be too dark to see anything by the time you arrive. It's a shame it's so difficult, but it is so worth it if you can pull it off!"

"Agreed. But if anyone's good at managing time, it's you."

Mashiro gave Midori a thumbs-up.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Mashiro take such a friendly attitude towards someone—someone beside Iroha and Sumire. She and Midori must've gotten closer while I wasn't looking.

Thinking back, I could remember Midori taking a real shine to Makigai Namako-sensei's script when I was working with the drama club. If these two were into the same author, then perhaps there were other things they shared in common too.

"We're completely on the same page!" Midori took Mashiro's hand and started shaking it up and down enthusiastically. "Since we arrived at the same time, why don't we join groups and see the shrine together?"

"Yeah, okay. Sounds fun."

"Wait, Mashiro, are you sure?" I cut in quickly.

Our focus here was supposed to be on getting Maihama and Ozu alone together. Getting the four of us out of the picture without arousing suspicion would be hard enough as it was, but adding an extra six people into the mix would make it outright impossible.

"Ah." Regret instantly crossed Mashiro's face as the realization struck.

Meanwhile, Midori's face was alight with the expectation of getting to hang out here with her new friend. Mashiro was sensitive to other people's feelings; she should be able to imagine how disappointed Midori would be if she retracted her offer now.

Her face pale, Mashiro turned to Maihama. "I-I'm sorry..."

"D-Don't worry! It's completely fine! It was a selfish request to start with, and if you start feeling bad now, so will I."

Maihama may have been strong-willed when it came to her love life, but at heart she was a serious, polite girl. She backed down immediately.

“W-Wait, is it better if we don’t go together?” Midori asked, looking a little unsure.

“It’s not like that!” Mashiro shook her head quickly. “None of you guys mind, right?”

“The more the merrier! I’ve never really spoken to anyone in the advanced class either, so this’ll be a chance to make some pals!” Takamiya exclaimed.

“It’ll be our pleasure. Oh, my name is Maihama.”

“I’m Suzuki! Let’s make it a good one!”

“Hope we’re not intruding,” I said, “but thanks for having us along.”

Nobody raised an objection. Midori’s group was also happy to tag along with us, and so we formed an amicable party.

There were, however, a couple of things that still worried me.

The first was that Ozu, while he was smiling, hadn’t said a word. The second was...

“Stupid, stupid, stupid! This was our chance to get them together! And I ruined it without even thinking...”

...Mashiro, quietly beating herself up in a way that I could see gradually sapping away her HP.

I hope she’ll be all right...

Our two groups set off together to explore the Fushimi Inari-taisha. Our first port of call was the most magnificent: the row of torii arches. The illusion of all these red gates in a row, seeming to go on and on forever was fantastical. Bathed in the crimson light of sunset, the long path ahead looked like it would lead us into the afterlife.

Mashiro and Midori were just as stoked about it as I’d expected from their conversation.

“It’s so magical! I feel totally inspired!” Mashiro said.

“This beautiful scarlet hue is said to reflect life, the Earth, and agriculture,” Midori said. “In other words, the power of Ukanomitama, the shrine’s deity!”

“Giving your deity a fox motif is the best idea ever. Those people in the past knew what they were doing.”

“Ukanomitama’s grace and beauty could be one of the reasons she is so revered as a god. Perhaps it is the use of the feminine form that created the widespread legends that foxes and other creatures such as snakes and cranes disguise themselves as women. I’ve long heard it said that there are more and more guys who can only experience

arousal in response to so-called ‘monster girls,’ that is, nonhuman girls, and perhaps it isn’t actually a new fetish, but an innate, genetic attraction to—”

“Midori-san.”

“It isn’t just limited to the attraction boys have towards girls either; as we conclude from the legends of werewolves, there have always been those who have fantasized about males with nonhuman features too, and—”

“Midori-san. Down.”

“It’s only natural that one might find themselves thinking werewolves are kind of attractive too and— Yes, Tsukinomori-san?”

“Too much information. And you just told the entire group about your kinks.”

“What?! I’m not talking about kinks, but a *genetic* attraction!”

I worried about those two—and I couldn’t approve of them discussing sexuality at a holy site either.

Exasperated, I shrugged to myself and turned my attention back to the row of arches. Fetishes aside, the deep spiritual motifs in this place were the perfect inspiration for *Koyagi*. Though the game was set in a western-style house, adding a touch of Japanese flavor might make for some unique concept art. There was precedent for console games with a strong, traditional Japanese influence making a splash in the global market, so it was definitely an idea worth pursuing.

I pulled out my phone to take a photo for reference purposes.

“Oh.”

Oh yeah. It was out of juice.

I had already been unsure this morning how long it was going to last, and now it was on the verge of dying, thanks to Iroha’s bout of remote teasing over LIME back in the taxi. Without a charger on me, it would probably die completely while I was trying to take the picture.

“Can I ask a favor, Ozu?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you take a photo with your phone for me? I wanted to get a few photos of this place as reference for a console version of *Koyagi*.”

“Sure thing. Why not just do it yourself, though?”

“I forgot my charger. This morning was kinda manic, and I left it at home.”

“Oh, right. The deathmatch between Iroha and Tsukinomori-san.”

Thanks, Ozu. I was trying to be vague about the details.

“Yeah... Anyway, I need as many as I can get. Keep my options open.”

“You’ve got a decent harem already. Now you just sound like a greedy scumbag.”

“I’m talking about *photos*. Change up the angles, get a few from a different position—that kind of thing.”

“Oh, right, *photos*. Roger that.”

Taking his phone, Ozu began to snap photos of the arches in front of us from various angles.

We didn’t have any finalized plans for our console game yet, but if it ended up in 3D, we’d need to make a map in 3D too—and the more references we had, the better.

Ozu took one photo after another, and he clearly knew what he was doing. He walked a small distance forward under the arches, and then...he stopped.

“What’s up?”

Ozu pointed up ahead. “There’s a massive crowd over there. Is there some celebrity visiting tonight or something?”

Past the arches was the inner shrine, the Okusha Hohaisho. Just like Ozu said, it was packed with people, and they seemed somewhat agitated—more than they should be for tourists visiting a sightseeing spot. There were students on class trips, and tourists from abroad, but also what looked to be reporters, holding large cameras.

Between the crowds, I caught glimpses of peculiar recording equipment, foreign men dressed as fleeing soldiers from another time, a woman in traditional Japanese makeup and dress, and an old man with a megaphone, sunglasses, and scarf combo that couldn’t make him anybody but the director.

Clearly they were filming something. Just then, I saw a figure who was more muscle than man run towards us from the crowd. It was Suzuki.

“Ooboshi! Kohinata! You guys have got to check this out.”

“Don’t shout. We’re at a shrine.”

“Trust me, this is worth shoutin’ about! It’s *insane*!”

“All right, I get it. I’m all ears, so just calm down for a second.” I pushed back against Suzuki’s muscles as he closed in on me, breathing heavily with excitement.

After a few deep breaths, he managed to speak at a regular volume again. “Listen to this, Ooboshi. It’s gonna blow your mind. They’re shooting a *Hollywood* movie right here!”

“Huh.”

“I said, they’re shooting a *Hollywood movie*!”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.”

This was one of the most popular tourist spots in the whole of Japan. It was no surprise to hear that some guy decided to shoot a movie here. I guess it was a funny coincidence that we happened to show up at the same time, but it didn’t feel that special to me, given my mom’s occupation.

“Oh, I was wondering what all the hubbub was!” At some point, Midori had caught up with us.

“Yeah! And get this, Kageishi-san! It’s a huge movie that brings together performing arts and cultures from all over the world. It’s sewn together by Hollywood craft and cool explosions! And they’re shooting it here! In Kyoto! Crazy, right? And y’know what Ooboshi said when I told him?! He just said ‘huh!’” Having failed to impress me, Suzuki now had his sights set on Midori.

But Midori just blinked at him. “Well, I’m not surprised Ooboshi-kun is unmoved.”

“What? C’mon, Kageishi-san, not you too! Gimme some reaction here! *They’re shooting a Hollywood movie!*”

“Yes, I heard that part.” Midori inclined her head, before saying quite naturally, “That’s why I don’t see why Ooboshi-kun should be surprised. He’s a Hollywood director himself.”

“AAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Forgetting all about the warning I’d given to Suzuki less than a minute earlier, I screamed, slammed my hand over Midori’s mouth, and then dragged her away like a crazed kidnapper until we were far away from our dumbfounded groupmates. She kept flailing around even after I pulled her behind a fox statue.

“Mmph! Mmph!”

“Quiet. Don’t make this harder than it has to be. I’m gonna let you talk now, but you have to promise not to shout, okay?”

Midori nodded, her eyes watering.

“Atta girl.”

When I removed my hand from her mouth, I had an odd sense of déjà vu, as though we’d been through this before.

Whatever.

“What’s Mashiro up to?”

“She’s still internally panegyriizing the torii corridor.”

“Pane-what-ing? But I’m glad she’s out of the way. I wouldn’t want her to get the wrong idea about me speaking to another girl again.”

This situation was messy enough without her; I just wanted to solve it without fuss.

“S-So what are you doing exactly, Ooboshi-kun? Why did you drag me over here?”

“Good question.”

“You don’t *know*?”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I just couldn’t let you say something so...outrageous, and I panicked.”

“Outrageous?”

“About me being a Hollywood director.”

“Pardon? Why is that outrageous? It’s the truth. That’s what my sister said when she brought you to help out the drama club.”

Oh, yeah. That.

It happened so long ago that I nearly forgot, but Midori was still under the impression that I was a big-shot Hollywood producer with a few blockbusters to my name. And why did she think that? One word: Shikibu.

Not content with hiding from her sister the fact that she was Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, a talented illustrator, Sumire had also told the drama club that I was a Hollywood director on a whim. They had wanted to know what made me qualified to reform their club, and Sumire needed a convincing answer that didn’t touch on my involvement with *Koyagi* or the 05th Floor Alliance. So she came up with the stupidest lie imaginable that only a total moron would believe.

It was still beyond me why Midori, who I firmly believed *not* to be a total moron, had fallen for it. It would probably remain a mystery for the next million years.

I had never bothered to come out with the truth because it hadn’t seemed particularly necessary. That was, until we came across an actual Hollywood movie crew. Embarrassing wasn’t a strong enough word for what would happen if my lie were to be exposed in front of the real deal. This seemed a good opportunity to clear up the misunderstanding.

The only problem was how to explain it.

At the very least, I needed to keep the truth about Murasaki Shikibu-sensei hidden. Iroha too—we weren’t at the stage yet when we could start speaking more freely about her work. If nothing else, it was probably fine to tell Midori about the Alliance and our game.

“To tell you the truth, that whole Hollywood thing...was a lie.”

“Sorry?”

“I asked Sumire-sensei to lie, because I didn’t want you guys to know the truth.”

That was a lie in itself, though not one that was going to make things more complicated, so I didn’t mind telling it.

“I don’t make movies. I make games.”

“Games?”

I gave her a full-on explanation, detail by detail.

I was making a mobile game. Makigai Namako-sensei was involved. Otoi-san was helping. The mysterious, lame excuse for an adult she met at that one party, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, was also one of our members. I was working hard with these people’s help to reach our goal.

Once I was done explaining, I bowed my head deeply. “I didn’t

feel able to tell you the truth back then, but that doesn't excuse me lying to you. I'm really sorry."

"It was...a lie? You're not a...Hollywood director?"

Each of Midori's baffled words was like a fresh stab of guilt right through my heart. It must have come as a real shock to her.

Midori and I didn't exactly get along when we first met, but over the course of half a year, our relationship had developed. It wasn't like we were close enough to meet up outside school, but I was fairly confident that she saw me as something close to a friend.

And despite the dubious quality of our "friendship," Murasaki Shikibu-sensei technically counted as one, making Midori a friend's little sister. It was only natural that she felt betrayed by my lie.

I could hear her angry shout now.

"I can't believe you tricked me!"

And then she'd cut all ties with me. It was what I deserved. I just needed to wait for it to come.

After a few moments more, Midori finally opened her mouth.

"Ooboshi-kun. There are more lies, aren't there? More things you aren't telling me."

She was right. So I stayed silent.

"You pretended to be Sumire's fiancé before too. There must be more secrets you're keeping from me."

She was right again. So I stayed silent.

"You apologized just now, but you're not telling me anything else."

I paused. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. There's no school rule saying you have to tell me everything. And as long as you're not breaking any rules, I can't stop you doing anything either."

"It kinda hurts that you're taking the committee-leader viewpoint right now."

"If you're truly feeling regretful, then tell me one thing."

"Depends what it is."

"It's about Tsukinomori-san."

Of course it was.

The crimson sunset stretched out the fox statue's shadows over an unusually serious Midori; those shadows did nothing to extinguish the sharp, astute light of her eyes.

"Your relationship with Tsukinomori-san." She hesitated. "Is that a lie too?"

Just like that, our pretense was shattered to smithereens.

"What makes you think so?"

"Nothing really, I suppose. Tsukinomori-san just seems a little...insecure for somebody in a relationship. And..."

A groundless assumption based on nothing but instinct. One that was right on the mark. And one that was incredibly presumptuous.

“And, if it is a lie, then...I need to know.”

I looked at her. “What for?”

But Midori avoided my gaze and left my question unanswered.

I considered the meaning behind her words. What could she *need* to know for? What was bothering her?

I thought back, and came to one conclusion: what I’d seen earlier.

Midori and Mashiro were closer than before. If they were friends now, I could see why Midori would feel unsettled about Mashiro keeping secrets from her. In the first place, my fake relationship with Mashiro was to help her have a happy school life after transferring. I couldn’t let it get in the way of a true, heartfelt friendship.

“Can I talk to Mashiro about this first?”

Midori didn’t respond verbally. She grabbed my arm and looked me right in the eye.

I couldn’t blame her. Having to wait for a response would just extend her uneasiness. It didn’t look like there was any getting out of this. And I had been taking advantage of Midori’s gullibility for a long time now without clearing things up. Maybe it was time to make things up to her.

“Okay. I’ll tell you the truth about our relationship.”

“You mean...it really is fake?!”

“That’s right. We’re not a couple. Our relationship is a sham.”

“O-Oh. Why go through the effort of pretending, then?”

“Lots of reasons, but they’re Mashiro’s, and they’re personal, so I can’t tell you. I hope you’ll understand that much, at least.”

Before Mashiro came to our school, she was bullied. That wasn’t the sort of information I could spread without her permission, no matter how much it might help explain things to Midori.

“I want you to believe just one thing.”

Ha. As if my request would have any credibility, given how many lies I’ve been telling her this entire time. But Midori looked right back at me without averting her gaze, waiting for this liar to continue.

“I don’t know...if we’re close enough to be considered friends. But you *are* important to me, Midori-san. I want you to know that we haven’t been keeping this a secret from you specifically. It’s something that we need to make sure doesn’t get out.”

“Yes, I suspected as much. But could you at least tell me *why* you can’t be any more specific?”

“I can’t go into too much detail, but this secret concerns the 05th Floor Alliance’s future, and it’ll be bad if it spreads publicly. At worst, it could destroy everything we’ve worked so hard to create. That’s why I never shared any of this with you earlier.”

“Why are you telling me now, then?”

“Because I’m confident I can trust you. I don’t think you’d blab any of this.”

Midori lowered her gaze, and I lost sight of her expression to the shadows. “So you and Tsukinomori-san weren’t lovers after all...” she murmured, without any discernible emotion in her tone.

Without warning, Midori turned on her heel.

“Midori-san?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anybody,” she said, without turning around. “And I certainly won’t do anything to betray your trust. So don’t worry about that.”

With that, Midori hurried back to her group.

She was acting strange, no doubt about it. Was I wrong to trust her?

I sincerely hoped nothing bad would come of this...but there was a tinge of uneasiness inside me that I just couldn’t shake off.

“Look at you Aki, jinxing anything and everything.”

“I wasn’t trying to jinx anything. I trusted her, that’s all.”

“But it’s all about the outcome with you, right?”

“...I’m sorry.”

Interlude: Sasara and Iroha 2

“...Sooound of your sweeeeeet vooooiice!”

“Yeah! Yeah! Wooo!”

School was out, and Iroha’s loud vibrato was pulsing through the karaoke room, perfectly matched to an emotional, nostalgic melody. Oh, and the backing whoops were a job for *me*, mood maker Tomosaka Sasara!

Did I know anything about enka? Nope, literally nothing! But I was good at bringing the hype when I was at karaoke with friends, whether I knew the song they were singing or not. This one, though, I think I remembered my grandma singing when I was really small, so it wasn’t like I didn’t know it *at all*.

When Iroha was done singing, she waited for the outro to fade out completely. Then, she sighed.

She deflated like a balloon and crashed back onto the couch. I shook the tambourine I was holding in front of her, trying to get her to cheer up.

“Whatsamatter?” I asked. “Still pining?”

“Shut it.” Iroha pushed my tambourine out of the way and began to sip loudly from the tomato juice she’d picked up from the drinks bar.

I only realized after we started hanging out more together, but Iroha literally never stops drinking tomato juice. Talk about obsession.

“What’s with the enka anyway? Not to be rude, but that song’s ancient.”

“I wanna sing *loud* and get it all out, but I’m really not in the mood for upbeat mainstream crap right now.”

“Jeez, you really have it bad.”

I’d already worked that much out from the fact she couldn’t even bring herself to put on the whole popular genius act in the classroom anymore. So far I was the only one in our class who knew how annoying she really was—that was how good she was at hiding her true self—but right now she was such a mess that she couldn’t even keep that up. Like I said. She had it *bad*.

There was something else too. Having to pick up your friend when they were all mopey and lovesick like this?

It was a total *pain*.

I did kinda wanna be there for her, though. She had helped me

out when everyone was trying to cancel me online. But it was still a pain.

Nothing I said made her feel any better, and she just kept on insulting me to vent her frustrations. Lucky for her, I was ultra mature and had a high stress threshold, so I could deal with an anxious Iroha like this no problem. Though having to deal with her the whole time till the second-years came back from their class trip *might* be just a *little* exhausting.

Iroha's phone, which she'd put on the table, started to buzz. She'd put it there instead of in her pocket because she was waiting for a callback. *Not* for an audition or anything crazy like that. Just from... Yeah, as if I even need to spell it out.

"Isn't that from Ooboshi-senpai?" I said.

Iroha was up, snatching up her phone like she was a manga heroine in the middle of an intense karuta match with her high school club.

"Is he for *real*? I can't believe he's messaging me the second we're apart! He can't stand being away from me that much, huh?"

"Does she have a split personality or what?!" I cringed.

"He's such a desperate loser! Isn't he, Sasara?"

"Leave me outta this! If you're gonna have a mental breakdown, keep it to yourself."

"Heh heh heh. Now let's see what sorta SOS he's sent me, shall we?"

Iroha's gloom had totally disappeared. Grabbing the tambourine off me, she started shaking as she looked at the screen.

There was a pause.

A long one.

"Huh?"

"What's up? You've frozen."

"Mmngh?" Iroha put her hand under her chin and thought, the spitting image of that one emoji.

"What's that face for?"

"I just got a message from someone in Kyoto."

"Ooboshi-senpai, right?"

"I thought it would be. But it's not." Iroha showed me her phone screen: a chat between her and someone called "Mizuki-san."

Mizuki-san: I'm recording @ Kyoto.

The short message came with a selfie of an *insanely* pretty woman. It was a perfectly thought-out shot; this lady knew the exact angle that would make her look best. She had silver hair, and bangs long enough to hide her eyes. She kinda reminded me of Mashiro-senpai, Iroha's

rival in love.

“What d’you think of this, Sasara?”

“Who uses the at symbol to give their location these days?”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

She asked what I thought and I told her. If she didn’t wanna know, she shouldn’t have asked.

“Who’s this lady? She looks a little like Mashiro-senpai.”

“Her name’s Tsukinomori Mizuki-san. She’s Mashiro-senpai’s mom.”

“Oh, huh.”

Why did Iroha have her on LIME, then? I couldn’t imagine texting with one of *my* friends’ moms!

“She’s a Broadway actress too.”

“Oh, hu...urgh?!” My voice cracked. “Back up, I think I misheard. Broadway, as in the ultra-famous musical theater, or Broadway as in...literally anything else? ‘Cause I *know* you don’t mean the first one!”

“I did mean the first one.”

“You’re kidding!”

Iroha was on LIME with a *Broadway actress*? There I was thinking she was lame for talking to her friend’s mom, only to find out that the mom was a massive star!

“A lotta stuff happened, and she asked if I wanted her to train me.”

“Oh my God! That’s a heck of a connection to have!”

“Like I said, a lotta stuff happened,” Iroha repeated, making it clear that she wasn’t about to spill a single drop of tea.

“That’s *insane*, though, getting to train under a Broadway actress! You *are* gonna say yes, right?”

I think Iroha mentioned once that it was her dream to become an actress. I knew she was doing a lot of work towards it right now, though she hadn’t told me exactly what. All I’m saying is that in her shoes, there’s no way I’d turn down an offer like that—but Iroha hesitated.

“To be honest, I’m not sure about it yet.”

“Why not?”

“Lotsa reasons.”

“Lotsa reasons, lotta stuff. Are you ever gonna explain anything to me?”

Just how complicated was her life?

“Whatever,” I said. “But you sure know a lotta impressive people, Iroha.”

“Hello? *You’re* the famous Pinstagrammer.”

“This might surprise you, but you don’t make that many friends

Pinstagramming. I don't mix with other influencers outside of collabs, and any celebrity who belongs to an agency has guards with them like, twenty-four seven, so I can't go out to eat with them in private or whatever."

"Nah, they probably just don't wanna have dinner with *you*."

"*What*?! Of course they'd wanna eat with me!" I paused. "Right?"

I felt anxious all of a sudden. What if everyone was having a great time without me, and completely behind my back?

No way. There's no one out there who wouldn't want *me* at their parties! Ha ha ha!

"You don't hafta hold back for my sake, okay? Go ahead and reply."

"You say something?"

"You already replied?! Jeez, I thought you were at least gonna be a *bit* polite."

I now realized she'd been on her phone this entire time, only putting half of her thinking power into replying to me while she typed on her phone. I didn't want to drop this topic, so I kept talking.

"What's Mizuki-san saying?"

"Said she's shooting a Hollywood movie."

"Hollywood? Movie? Why? I thought Broadway actresses only did musicals."

"Apparently, it's a huge movie that brings together performing arts and cultures from all over the world. It's sewn together by Hollywood craft and cool explosions."

"Sounds like a movie with too much going on."

"It's got a ton of musical numbers too, which is why they hired lots of Broadway actresses."

"Huh. Are you sure she's allowed to tell you all of this?"

This movie hadn't been announced yet, right?

"Plus, you didn't even ask her and she's telling you all this stuff about what she's doing! Is she one of those losers who can't go one second without validation?"

"Losers like you?"

"Hey!"

What was she on about now? I wasn't addicted to validation *at all*!

"She's telling me this for a reason," Iroha said.

"Hngrgh." I grumbled when Iroha showed me her phone instead of responding to my outburst.

I was *actually* at my limit right now. Even someone as patient as me could get mad when they were constantly ignored, and I needed Iroha to know that.

"She asked if I wanted to go see the set."

"No way!"

I went from moody to full-on hyped. This could be a golden opportunity.

“You gotta go for it Iroha! Go! Go! And go some more!”

“S-Stop leaning towards me like that. And if I go too far, I’ll overshoot way past Kyoto.”

“I can’t help the leaning, okay, Iroha?! You’ve *got* to accept her invite, or you’ll regret it for sure! Also, shut up!”

“You really think I should?”

For once, Iroha didn’t push back. But I guess for once, I was pushing her instead. There was a reason for that, though. If she went off to Kyoto, I could finally catch a break from her moping! Like I said, a golden opportunity!

I was determined to get her to Kyoto no matter what! That was what my “Get outta here and into Kyoto!” operation was all about.

“Lemme tell you something my favorite editor once said. ‘When you get an opportunity, don’t waste time worrying about it! Only those who grab those chances at the speed of light are gonna make it big!’”

“But if I go to Kyoto now, I’m gonna hafta stay the night.”

“They’ll have a hotel for you, and Mizuki-san’ll take care of the rest of the costs! Look at that message she sent you literally just now!”

The message popped up at just the right time for me to use it to my advantage.

“What about school?”

“Gimme a break!”

Slap!

I slapped right ’round the face. Except her face was the tambourine, because I wouldn’t *actually* hit her.

“You’re young! You’re s’posed to be selfish! What d’you go to school for anyway? To make someone *else* happy?!”

“I mean...I guess I go for myself.”

“Okay, so there’s this one event that’ll be super good for you, and then there’s school. Which is more important?”

“Well, school—”

“The first step towards your future, a once-in-a-lifetime chance, a ticket to a celebrity lifestyle where you could be making hundreds of millions of yen a year, and some lousy lessons that you can just catch up with later by reading the textbooks. Which is more important?”

“That’s totally a leading question.”

“Kyoto, where Ooboshi-senpai is, and school, where he’s not. Where d’you wanna go?”

“Well...”

“Where do you wanna go?”

“Ngh...”

I put my face closer to Iroha's and piled on the pressure. She sure was head-over-heels for Ooboshi-senpai. She started looking way less sure as soon as I brought him up.

One more push, and I bet she'd give in. It was time to unleash the second advanced negotiating tactic I'd learned from Hoshino-san. This one was called the gaslighting boyfriend! After piling on the pressure, the trick was to suddenly get soft with them.

"It's okay, Iroha. There's nothing to feel bad about. If anything, you should blame society and the government." I whispered, keeping my tone gentle. Comforting. "Just tell me what you *really* want. Okay?"

Now I had both the angel and the devil on her shoulders pushing her to go to Kyoto. As her mouth moved back and forth like she was literally chewing over my question, I brought the mic slowly to her lips.

"I'm sorry. I really do wanna go to Kyoto..."

Finally, I'd squeezed the crimson truth from her soul like it was a particularly tough grape. Her desire echoed around the room.

"I knew you could tell me the truth." Patting Iroha on the shoulder, I gave her a thumbs-up. When your best friend makes a courageous decision, you gotta praise them for it.

I was sure this would be a major turning point in Iroha's life too—for the better.

But damn, was I *nice*. Way too nice. When I got to heaven, they were definitely putting me down for a mansion, the kind reserved for VIPs. Ha ha ha!

Sure, I had a hunch that Iroha going to Kyoto right now would mean big trouble for some reason, but whatever.

Good riddance, moody Iroha!

Chapter 4: My Fake Girlfriend Knows All About Sushi!

By the time we were done at the Fushimi Inari-taisha and had made it back to the hotel, it was already pretty dark out. The palace-like hotel had a historic feel to it on the inside too, giving its atmosphere a touch of mystery—which was tempered by the teenagers wandering the old-fashioned corridors in modern, western-style clothing. Elegance and aristocracy were the last things on our mind as we walked and talked completely casually, treating this building as if we owned the place. I counted myself among those teenagers.

We were heading for the canteen for dinner. The musclehead of the group, Suzuki, was walking next to me, his eyes alight with excitement.

“Man, spending the night with everyone’s so hype, and we don’t even gotta wear our stuffy uniforms!”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“C’mon, Ooboshi! Show a little enthusiasm, would ya?”

“I could try, but it wouldn’t be genuine...”

I was used to spending the night out of uniform with other students. I had parties like that with the Alliance all the time—once a week, at the very least.

“Damn, I’m impressed. It’s like you’re an adult or something, used to hitting the town at night. I guess that’s what happens when you manage to hold down a long-term girlfriend.”

“Uh, the girlfriend’s got nothing to do with it. Well, I guess she sort of does, but that’s getting a little nitpicky.”

Suzuki sighed. “What is it they call people like you? Normies? Social butterflies? What I’m saying is, you really seem like a guy who’s got it all.”

“Me? A normie? You’re joking, right? You’re way more normie than I am!”

“Y’know, I think you’re right. *I’ve* got a gym membership!” Suzuki shot me a friendly grin.

Hold on. Suzuki was one of the most normie, outgoing guys in our entire class, but *he* hadn’t realized he was a normie until I pointed it out. When you think about it rationally, I met up and partied with my friends practically every week—something normies were renowned for.

Could it be that I didn't have a particularly objective view of myself after all?

Before I could figure it out, we were at the huge canteen. They apparently used this hotel for residential training for large companies, so there were more than enough seats for our entire year group.

We were divided by class and then by groups. The boys sat on one side of the table while the girls sat across from us. The Kyoto culinary delights being set before us on the table caused a widespread stir.

"Whoa! I've only ever seen food like this in dramas, when someone's trying to bribe a politician!"

"It's like these dishes were *made* for the palates of the upper class!"

"I gotta agree. Look at these low-calorie side dishes!"

The comments I heard around me were equal parts stupid and genius.

Venomous Queen Kageishi Sumire stood on a platform at the front of the dining hall, smiling as she picked up on the students' awe. (I say smiling, but to me it looked more like a smug smirk). "Rest assured that I refused to compromise on the quality of the food! I scrutinized an exhaustive list of the highest-rated inns in Kyoto to find the place which served the best cuisine possible. Remember to be grateful as you indulge in your feast!"

"Thank you, Kageishi-sensei!" The students raised an enthusiastic salute to their commander. It was a beautiful sight, through which you could see the trusting relationship between teacher and student.

"What's she getting so smug for?" I wondered aloud. "It was all decided by your algorithm, Ozu."

"It trawled through numerous review sites gathering information, and then pulled out the most suitable option—after analyzing said reviews for their credibility, of course. It took no time at all to put it together; it really was pretty simple."

"In other words, Sumire-sensei scrutinized nothing at all."

"Don't be too hard on her. The school council president asked me to help out the Class Trip Committee, after all," Ozu said. "Leadership skills include being able to make efficient use of your team members."

"I agree with that, sure. I just don't think she's got anything to be smug about."

"Aha ha ha."

"Not that I mind her borrowing your skills if it means our class gets to eat like kings."

Not only was Sumire an impressive artist, she was also well suited to being a teacher.

"Yo, I have *never* seen a fish like this!" Takamiya exclaimed.

"That's pike conger," Mashiro said. "It's a famous Kyoto delicacy."

“Whoa, really?”

“The center of Kyoto is far away from the sea, so it’s odd that they’d have a famous dish like this, doesn’t it? But the pike conger is a hardy fish that keeps its freshness all the way from the Genkai Sea, where it’s fished, to Kyoto. It’s been known as a staple fish of this city’s cuisine since ancient times.”

“Wow, Mashiro-chin! You’re like Fishipedia!”

“Seafood is literally the greatest thing ever,” Mashiro said with a smile. “I know everything there is to know about it!”

Takamiya was great at encouraging Mashiro to talk, and Mashiro was doing just that by sharing her fishy trivia. If I wasn’t mistaken, she was even puffing her chest out proudly. The girls were getting along swimmingly. There were some people out there who got annoyed when others tried to share trivia with them, but luckily Takamiya wasn’t one of them—her eyes were alight with curiosity.

“You’re *awesome*, Mashiro-chin! Don’tcha agree, Kyouko-chin?”

“I-I do. I’m very impressed, Tsukinomori-san.”

“Aw, I’m nothing special! Unless...” Mashiro laughed.

“You know just as much as a professional author who writes about monsters based on sea creatures. If you’ve got any other tidbits like that, lemme have ’em!”

Mashiro suddenly clammed up. “Actually, I hate seafood.”

“Tsukinomori-san? You have a split personality or something?” Maihama blinked in confusion.

Maybe Mashiro felt she’d been too smug and suddenly got embarrassed.

I guess I could relate to that.

After enjoying a hearty dinner together, we returned to our rooms.

Out of the hotel’s eight floors, our school had two of them. Floor six was given to the boys, and floor seven to the girls. The usual explanation for separating floors by gender was to avoid anything unsavory happening, but to be honest I didn’t think there was any danger of that even if the floors were mixed. And on the flip side, I doubted a single floor would be enough to stop the sort of horny brute who was determined enough to get their rocks off that they’d do that sort of thing with other students about anyway.

“Hngh! Hngh! Hngh!”

Our room sat somewhere between Western and Japanese styles. I guess you could call it a modern Japanese style. It was equipped with all the devices vital to civilization: a TV, an electric kettle, and plenty of power outlets. Three of these outlets were currently occupied by

chargers, their cords each attached to a smartphone. One of them was mine. Luckily, Ozu had brought along a universal charger, which I was now borrowing.

“Hah! Hah! Hah!”

There were three large single beds in this room, as well as a replica hanging scroll. The floor was laid with tatami, which gave off the faint scent of rushes.

“Yeah! Hah! Yeah! Hey!”

Beyond the room’s sliding screen was a spacious veranda complete with round table, chairs, and a massage chair. The large window gave a view out over the night skyline, allowing the guests to indulge in the carefree luxury that was traveling—

“Ungh! Ungh! Ungh! Haah!”

“Shuuuuuuuuut up! I thought you were training your muscles, not your mouth!” I finally snapped at the jerkass in the tank top doing vigorous squats on the tatami mats. I was *trying* to let the soft fragrance of traditional Japan fill my lungs, but at this rate, all I was going to get was sweat.

The entire atmosphere was ruined.

Suzuki stopped mid-squat and frowned questioningly at me.

“Listen, Ooboshi. You can’t train without abdominal breathing!”

“Okay, so I can’t argue with that—but why are you even training right now in the first place?”

“You gotta train after eating. It’ll be bathtime soon, and I don’t wanna get all sweaty *after* that.”

“Soon” being “in one hour.” The hotel’s bath wasn’t big enough for our entire year group to go in at once, so each class had been allotted a time. That was what we were waiting for right now.

“Can I get your opinion on something quick, Aki?” Ozu asked.

“What’s up?”

“You know how I was collecting data for the class trip? D’you think I could use this?” Ozu beckoned me from where he sat on the bed, looking at his phone.

I looked over his shoulder. He was reading a romantic comedy manga published in a weekly manga anthology. People had been talking about this one a lot lately.

“*The Haunted Forty-Octuplets: Love is Scary*. Yeah, the class trip chapter was pretty highly rated.”

“Yeah. The protag’s good at conversation too. That’s why I thought...”

“Right. He’s got a likable way of speaking. I think he’s a safe bet.”

“Okay, so it should be fine...” Ozu trailed off, apparently still unconvinced.

“What’s the matter?”

“The thing is, he spends most of the class trip with this one girl. All the scenes are about romance or intimacy. I dunno if it’s gonna be very useful for talking to a group of girls I’m not interested in, or the both of you,” he motioned to Suzuki, “in a public setting.”

“Ah, I see. Yeah, you might have a point there.”

“What are you two talking about?”

Something perfectly normal and everyday, as it happened, but Suzuki clearly wasn’t keeping up. He shot us a confused frown, his knees still bent from his last squat.

“Uh...” I hesitated. “I’m not really sure how to explain.”

“I’m working on my conversation skills,” Ozu answered simply, taking away the need for me to evade the question.

If he was okay with Suzuki knowing, then there was no reason for me to hide anything either.

“But you were just talking ’bout manga, right? What’s that got to do with conversation skills?”

“There’s a lot of good data in manga, because the characters talk clearly. It’s the perfect medium to study.”

“‘Study’? But wait, aren’t conversations in real life and conversations in manga different?”

“Stop trying to act like the king of common sense when you’re literally standing there working out on a class trip. You’re making me think that *we* might be the weirdos.”

Secretly, I agreed with him. Manga was definitely not what you wanted to use as a communication textbook. Speaking with real live humans would be a hundred times more efficient. Unlike games, real life didn’t have a debug mode. There was no beta version which could be used to gather feedback and guide you to perfection; no safety net. Results came the moment you took an action; results with the potential of defining a relationship forever.

Real life was a one-use product, where failure had irreversible consequences. It wasn’t like the dev build of a game, which you could keep improving, little by little. Most people survived by learning from experience without any major issues, but that was a much more difficult task for Kohinata Ozuma. Ozu’s brain was incredible and picked things up fast, like a computer set in a human body, but the trade-off was his lack of communication skills.

“I get all the info from the story and sift through it to identify the best material to learn from. There’s a lot of noise: stuff that’s not useful for real-life conversations.”

“Huh. I guess if it works for you.” Suzuki shrugged.

“I can take you as an example,” Ozu continued. “All your hnhing and haahing just now was useless data. The kinda stuff that, if you included it in a novel, would make the readers mad.”

“Y’know, Kohinata, if you wanna work on your communications skills, maybe you wanna start by not saying stuff that hurts like a thousand stab wounds to the heart?”

“Yeah, that’s the sorta stuff he struggles with.” I sighed, scratching the back of my head. “Identifying the line between what hurts and what doesn’t is probably the most difficult thing. It’s also what makes it hard to practice with real-life conversations.”

It was more complicated than you might think. In a real conversation, the same line could be funny, affectionate, or downright rude depending on who you were talking to and where. For example, “I love you” could be a confession when spoken with a serious expression over a nighttime cityscape, a sign of friendship when you and your best friend are punching each other in the shoulder, or a snide comment when said by a fraudster counting through the wad of bills you just handed over to them without question.

As long as you could pick up on the subtle differences between those things, it’d be smooth sailing. Ozu couldn’t.

“Y’know, you guys are...” Suzuki began.

I stiffened. Had I misjudged how close we were? We’d spent the whole day enjoying Kyoto together, so I thought it’d be fine to reveal this much. Maybe that was naive of me.

I thought back to junior high school. To the weird stares Ozu and I got. To our experience of being outcasts in the closed environment that was our classroom. I couldn’t let the same thing happen in high school!

“Wait, you’ve got it wrong! We were just kidding, um...” I leaned forward, hurrying to patch things up. Maybe I wasn’t acting quickly enough; all I knew was that I needed to act before he started forming negative opinions about Ozu.

“You guys...are super weird!”

I blinked.

What?

Thanks to his abdominal breathing, Suzuki’s voice rang clear throughout the roof before I could finish what I was saying.

Without context, his words could easily be taken as an insult. But there was a bright smile on his face, and not a hint of hesitation in his tone, and it was obvious he didn’t mean anything bad by it.

“Like, super entertaining! Hey, if I can do anything to help with your communication training, just lemme know!”

I instinctively let out a dry laugh, relieved that I’d decided to pay more attention to my private life before we came on this class trip. There was definitely some self-reflection I needed to do regarding my decision to dismiss Suzuki as a normie. I’d always been under the misapprehension that my views had been objective and all-

encompassing, but in truth, I'd been stuck behind a filter in a world filled with my own prejudices.

Maybe our school—not just our school, but our society—was easier to live in than I thought, for both me and Ozu. Obviously, it was dangerous to jump to a conclusion like that based on a single sample. But I did get the sense that maybe, just maybe, I could trust this guy.

“If anything comes up, I'll let you know,” I said.

“Sure!”

“Hold on, Aki. Didn't you mention something about a bath?”

“Yeah.”

“I reckon the gods watching over us'll get mad if you don't actually describe the bath scene before the story's over.”

“Meaning?”

“You'd better start talking about the bath scene now. Give the people what they want.”

Interlude: Mashiro and Midori

How could this happen?

I should have known this hell was coming back when I read those two words: class trip.

Right now, I was in the changing room for the bath. I had my change of clothes ready under my arm, but once I was past the screen, what I saw made me regret everything.

Girls from three different classes, around fifty in total, were chatting excitedly and taking off their clothes. Back in junior high school, I was already pretty much a full-time shut-in, so I skipped out on the class trip. I'd never been naked around so many people before. Not even for swimming class. I always skipped those too. If you wanna make something of it, I'm all ears.

Swimming was an unfair sport, competition based on nothing but the physique you were born with and the genetic lottery. So unfair that I didn't see the point in participating. And no, I'm not just jealous because I can't swim. Shut up.

"What're you doin' freezing by the entrance, Mashiro-chin?" Takamiya-san said from behind me, pushing me farther into the room without waiting for a response. There was a loud scraping noise as she pushed me, like I was a boulder being forced out the way with the help of a hidden move. Where Takamiya-san picked up the machine to teach her such superhuman strength was beyond me.

"I don't believe this. Everyone's just taking their clothes off in front of each other," I said.

"Well, it's a bath. No one cares."

"I don't get it. You'd be a perv if you started stripping in the classroom, but it's fine for a bath? Either way, you're naked..."

"What's hard to understand? It's all about context. You gotta take your clothes off to get in the bath."

"Hngh... What about you, Maihama-san? You're serious and you like reading, right? I bet you can see what's wrong with this!"

It was a mistake to ask a wild girl like Takamiya-san about her sensitivities. Maihama-san was more reserved, like me. I turned to her, sure she'd give me a better answer.

"Hm? Did you say something?"

She was already naked.

"Uh... You didn't even hesitate... Okay, I see how it is."

“What? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, not at all. There’s nothing wrong with being yourself, Maihama-san.”

A lot of adult doujinshi featured characters who looked all smart and serious, but were actually massive perverts. I guess they existed in real life too. I was dumb to think she’d take my side. Hmph.

“I’m gonna get changed over there,” I said.

“Whoa, Mashiro-chin. Is it just me, are you being a bit *icy*?”

“Think that if you want. I’ve got my pride...” I shook off Takamiya-san, who was clinging to me, “...to protect!” I then hurried to a corner of the changing room.

I felt much better here in the gloom, where no one could see me. This was where I was at home. The gloom was somewhere I could always go back to.

Having to talk to the people I saw every single day in the classroom—except buck naked now—was going to be pure torture. I genuinely wanted to be anywhere but here. I knew Takamiya-san and Maihama-san wanted to talk with me, but I didn’t see any harm in being alone for bathtime at least.

Hidden away, I slipped my clothes off and replaced them with a towel, careful to cover my bare skin. Now I was ready to go.

I couldn’t see the other two in the changing room anymore; it was a relief that they’d gone on without me. I’d sneak in by myself, wash quickly, dash into the bath, then make a swift escape before anyone could realize I was even there. It was the perfect plan.

I put it into action right away, chanting at myself while I showered: *No one’s looking, no one’s looking, no one’s looking...* Then I headed for a tub in the least populated corner, invisible like a ninja.

“Huh?”

Unfortunately, that corner wasn’t completely deserted. There was someone—someone familiar—already taking a bath.

“Oh, um... H-Hello, Otoi-san...”

“Sup, Tsukinomori.”

Otoi-san had her long, red hair tied up on top of her head, her towel folded on top of it like a paperweight. For better or worse, she was always quiet and low energy. She was barely done greeting me when she lost interest, sinking the lower half of her face beneath the surface of the hot water and blowing bubbles. I was glad it was her sitting here and no one else. Her complete indifference was really helping right now.

I got in the bath next to her, leaving a three-person gap between us.

It was so *warm*. It felt like there was a glowing aura emanating from my body’s very core. If there was a power sleeping deep inside

me waiting to be unlocked so I could learn a secret art, now was the perfect time for it to awaken. I hated being naked in front of everyone, but it didn't take away from how great the water felt.

Thanks for picking somewhere with a great bath, Sumire-sensei.

"Y'know, we don't really speak much, huh?"

"Hm?"

While I was busy letting the hot water melt away my thoughts, a sleepy Otoi-san suddenly called out to me.

"How've y'been?"

"Uh..." I blinked at her question, struggling to regather my thoughts.

"*Koyagi*'s paused updates for a while, right? I was wonderin' what kinda effect that's had on the Alliance."

"Aki hasn't told you?"

"He's given me the gist."

I was surprised. Otoi-san might not be a core member of the Alliance, but I always had this sense that she and Aki just *got* each other. I thought she'd know everything there was to know about the situation.

"Nothing's really changed that much," I said. "The updates won't be on hold for that long. Everyone knows what the next goal is, so it's pretty much business as usual."

"Oh yeah?"

"Aki wants to try making a console game. He wants the Alliance to reach a wider audience and step out onto the world stage. That means we gotta expand our outlook too. Max out our motivation."

"We"? But you're not a proper member, right?"

"Oh, um, no, I... You know I want to be an author, right? All this 'onto bigger and brighter' stuff is inspiring me too!"

"Gotcha."

Thank goodness Otoi-san was too lazy to think too much about things. With anyone else, my slip of the tongue right then would have been fatal!

I still had to keep my guard up around Otoi-san, though. I couldn't let anyone know about Makigai Namako, and the warm air in here was melting away my inhibitions, making me worry that I might say something I shouldn't.

"Oh yeah, there's somethin' else I wanted to ask. Looks to me like you and Kageishi are gettin' along pretty well."

"I'm not so sure. I feel like she's on my side, like an ally or something, but I don't really know how to, well, get closer to her..."

"I'm on the class trip committee with her, right? Sometimes we talk."

"Oh yeah, that's right."

I remembered that they were both on the committee for the culture festival too. Midori-san, who was super honest and serious because she was born with a bamboo rod up her spine, and Otoi-san, who had about as much energy as a willow tree. It was weird how they ended up together so often when their personalities were the complete opposite of each other.

“N’ basically, Kageishi’s been actin’ kinda off lately.”

“Off?”

“So we went back to the hotel, right, ’n’ the committee met up to make sure the first day all went smoothly. ’N’ then... Well, see for y’self.” Otoi-san jerked her chin, and I looked over.

“Huh? Midori-san!”

Midori-san was sitting in the steamy water of a nearby bath, completely spaced out. It looked like the heat was getting to her; her cheeks were red, and her gaze was blank.

“Been like that ever since we got back to the hotel. Know anythin’?”

“Well, we were at the Fushimi Inari-taisha together, but nothing happened there. I don’t think so, at least.”

“Huh.”

“Oh, except...”

She *had* been acting a little cold when we were on our way back. Not enough to make me think it was anything more than fatigue from trekking around Kyoto all day, though.

Maybe something *did* happen after all? I didn’t have enough life experience to give her any advice, but I knew she had my back when it came to my relationship with Aki. If there was anything at all I could do, I shouldn’t hesitate.

Suppressing my embarrassment, I stood up and moved on over to the bath Midori was in.

“Are you okay, Midori-san?”

“Eek! Tsu-Tsu-Tsukinomori-san?!”

“D-Don’t shout.” Flustered, I put my hand over her mouth. “I didn’t scare you that much, did I?”

I paused, listening to our surroundings, but luckily the other students were talking too loudly for any of them to have heard Midori-san’s shriek.

“I-I’m sorry. You caught me at an inopportune moment...”

“You make it sound like I caught you doing something dirty...”

“Wh— No, that’s not what I meant! I know *some* people might have fantasies about well-built men at the onsen offering massages while you’re bathing, but look around you! Do you see any muscular men? Because I only see girls!”

“I’m gonna do you a favor and not comment on the overly specific

scenario you just told me about.”

“What? Oh, no, you’re mistaken! That was the plot of a dirty manga I scolded some boys for reading on their phones during lunch. That’s the *only* reason I know about it!”

“It doesn’t bother me, okay? I’ve heard that excuse a billion times too.”

“But I’m telling the truuth!” Midori-san wailed.

I felt bad thinking this, but that pathetic look on her face was like something right out of one of the dirty doujinshi she was probably talking about. It was the look of a character that needed taming and to be put in their place. The kind to be a hit with the more devoted doujinshi fans.

“So what’s wrong? I’m here if you wanna talk about it.”

Midori-san swallowed, her expression troubled. She looked up at me like she was searching my eyes for something. I only came over here because I wanted to help, but right now I felt like a suspect being interrogated by a detective.

Midori-san kept on looking at me, then away, then back again, like she had something to say but wasn’t sure if she should. In the end she decided to speak, though she still seemed hesitant.

“Tsukinomori-san... Your relationship with Ooboshi-kun... It’s fake, isn’t it?”

I stared. It took me a few seconds to react. “What?” I had no idea what I was supposed to say. “I’m...his girlfriend.” I knew my choked answer sounded unconvincing; I even looked away from her when I spoke. Maybe if I’d done a better job, Midori-san wouldn’t be eyeing me with more suspicion right now.

“Are you quite sure about that?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Swear to God?”

“I’m an atheist.”

Midori-san took a moment to rephrase. “Swear on Ooboshi-kun’s life?”

Now I was stuck. No matter how many times I said yes, she’d keep on asking, like RPG dialogue that looped endlessly if you picked the wrong option. Specifically, one where the NPC got more insistent the more you refused.

“It’s a fake relationship, necessary due to your circumstances, but the truth is, you’re both...single, right?”

“What makes you think so?”

“Ooboshi-kun told me.”

This time, I gawked.

“What?”

Chapter 5: The Boys and Girls on the Class Trip are All About Party Games!

“Man, I’ve heard it’s traditional to drink fruit milk at bathhouses, but this is the first time I’ve actually done it—and it’s not bad.”

I was done with my bath and now I was chilling. My body was steaming as it worked to correct its temperature, and the cold milk pouring into my stomach made it feel like I was freezing my insides, refocusing my mind. Now that I was taking it easy in one of the hotel’s comfy yukata, it really settled in just how busy I’d been up till now.

I looked around and spotted some of my classmates in the same yukata here and there. Ozu and Suzuki weren’t here yet; they were still in the bath. The part of me that was obsessed with efficiency had helped us to get through the day nice and quickly, taking the most efficient route without rushing and while still enjoying ourselves. I hadn’t even made a conscious effort to do things efficiently this time around. I guess I was just genetically wired to live life in the fast lane.

The trifling conversation I could hear from the other students was making me jealous. No matter where I looked, everyone around me just seemed to find it so easy to relax. Or maybe it was just a case of the grass being greener, the same phenomenon that led me to believe everyone in my class other than me was a normie.

As I enjoyed the fragrance of fruit milk up my nose, I spotted a flustered figure in my peripheral vision. No sooner was she out of the girls’ entrance to the bath than she was heading straight towards me, not paying a lick of attention to her surroundings.

“Aki. This way.”

It was Mashiro.

I instinctively leaned back as she thrust herself right in close to me. Her body was enveloped in the thin cloth of a yukata, her cheeks flushed from the bath’s steam, and her hair fragrant. And she was demanding my attention, so much so that I couldn’t even pay attention to the typical teenage thoughts that would usually hound me when presented with a girl just out of the bath.

“Wh-What’s the matter?”

“Come with me.” Mashiro didn’t answer my question. Instead, she grabbed my hand as she walked past and pulled me along without slowing down.

I had to focus on keeping my balance and making sure my half-

drunk bottle of fruit milk didn't spill. We didn't stop until we were behind a large fish tank a small distance away. The gentle blue light shining from the water colored Mashiro's face, which was twisted with anger for the umpteenth time that day.

"Why did you tell Midori-san the truth about our relationship?"

"Oh. That's what this is about..."

I was relieved. I'd been worried I'd set her off again without realizing, but this was fine; I'd been planning to talk to her about it soon anyway. I apologized before launching into a detailed explanation. About how I was justified in breaking Midori's incessant illusion that I was a Hollywood director, and that it wouldn't be healthy to let her believe so many lies all at once, which was why I'd come clean.

"I understand... I guess we *were* lying to her, so there wasn't really anything else to do..."

"Right? We've both known Midori-san for a while now too. You're pretty friendly with her, right?"

"Not really."

"No? I thought you were treating her in the same cold way you treat Iroha, so I was sure..."

"We have each other on LIME, and sometimes we talk. That's it."

"Doesn't that make you friends?"

"You think so? She's never asked to be friends."

"Mashiro... Becoming someone's friend isn't something that happens by asking."

"Wait. You're kidding."

"I know. It's shocking, right? But apparently, making friends is something that just sort of...happens when you're social with people."

"I don't get it..." Mashiro put a thoughtful hand over her mouth like a detective figuring out a crime. "This 'friends' thing is way too complicated..."

Seeing her like that was kind of sad. It reminded me that she barely had any EXP when it came to friendship.

"I *am* sorry for telling her without asking you first. But Midori-san's smart; I'm sure she wouldn't go around telling everyone, so you've got nothing to worry about."

"Midori-san is...smart?"

"C'mon, don't be rude."

Did I need to remind her that Midori got a perfect grade on every test?

Though to be honest, I knew what she was getting at.

"Found you, Mashiro-chin! We've missed you ever since you disappeared in the bath!"

"Wah! T-Takamiya-san!" Mashiro cried as a wild Takamiya

tackled—sorry, hugged—her from behind.

Maihama showed up a beat later, looking shocked as she registered my face. “O-Oh, sorry! We must’ve interrupted you when you were having a moment...”

“Hm? Oh, hey, Ooboshi! You guys havin’ a smooch back here?”

“No,” Mashiro said. “I just...saw him after getting out of the bath, and we were having a chat...”

“Makes sense. You already sit together in class and you’re like, neighbors, so you can be all over each other whenever you want! It’s not like the class trip is anything special for you guys.”

Wait.

“I don’t remember telling you we were neighbors,” I said.

“Ack!” Mashiro jumped at least a few inches into the air. I then noticed her making desperate eye contact with Takamiya. Eye contact that clearly failed to have its intended effect.

“It came up when Mashiro-chin was gushin’ about you,” Takamiya said.

Mashiro...!

I shot her an exasperated look and watched as the sweat poured down her forehead and she shrunk back awkwardly. Yes, I was wrong for telling Midori the truth about us without permission, but Mashiro had just leaked my address to these girls. That was highly personal information.

“I-I’m sorry... I got overexcited and it just kinda slipped out...”

“I guess we’re both as bad as each other, huh?”

“We are...” Mashiro said, despondent.

Although, the fact that she’d spilled my address was minor compared to the good news that she’d found classmates she could speak to at length. I didn’t want her to start getting down over it, so I started thinking of ways I could cheer her up again. In the end, it was a spirited request from Takamiya that flipped the gloomy atmosphere on its head.

“Hey, Ooboshi! If y’weren’t planning on spending this evening alone together, mind if us girls crash you guys’ room after this?”

“Hm. I guess we *do* have some time before lights-out,” I said.

“W-Wait, Asuka-chan, let’s not. We shouldn’t make them uncomfortable by forcing it...”

“Ah...”

Maihama’s timid reaction combined with the expectant light in Takamiya’s eyes illuminated a light bulb in my head.

Why did I have to be so dense? There could only be one reason the girls were looking to get into our room.

“Got it. Feel free to drop by.”

“A-Are you sure?” Maihama asked.

“Yeah. Ozu and Suzuki’ll probably be fine with it.”

“Awesome! Make sure you wear your lucky underwear, Kyouko-chin!” Takamiya said.

“N-No way!”

Takamiya laughed cheerfully as she withdrew, with a red-faced Maihama following after her.

“You just can’t keep your nose out, can you, Aki? You don’t even know them that well, but you’re still going out of your way to help,” Mashiro said, not moving a muscle.

She really didn’t get it, did she?

I sighed. “That’s not all this is. This means you’ll be coming to our room too, right?”

“Huh?”

“I might not be sure how I feel about you, but I wanna have fun on this class trip too. You can trust me on that.”

Mashiro paused. “Oh.” Then she turned her back to me to face the elevator where Takamiya and Maihama were waiting.

“It’s not good enough unless I’m in love with you?”

Maybe that wasn’t a fair question to ask. Actually, it was a pretty shitty thing to ask, considering I knew she wanted our relationship to be real. But despite all of that, she was an important neighbor to me; my cousin and childhood friend who spent a ton of time with me when we were small. To me, those facets of our relationship were just as precious—if not more precious—than our being lovers. Right now, those were my hundred-percent honest feelings on the matter.

“I’ll let you off. For now,” Mashiro replied haughtily, still sounding a little grumpy.

Even then, I was sure I’d made the correct decision this time around.

Because, in the glass of the aquarium, I could see a smile on her face.

“All right, so we’ve got three guys and three girls, and we’re in the hotel on a class trip late at night. Y’know what that calls for?!”

“The most crazy, most *amazing* romance party game! Good for welcome parties, offline meets, mixers, and every sort of gathering you can think of! You know what I’m talking about!”

“The king game!”

“You got it!”

Takamiya Asuka and Suzuki Takeshi. Wild meets muscle. Their dumb voices seemed to amplify each other as they reverberated around the hotel room. Around fifteen minutes after everyone was

done in the bath, our entire group had reconvened in the boys' room. Takamiya and Suzuki were standing on the beds as if they owned the place, thrusting their fists high towards the ceiling. Mashiro, Ozu, Maihama, and I were sitting on cushions on the floor, each of us making ourselves comfortable.

"You'd think they could turn it down a notch," Mashiro muttered.

"C'mon, now. I know how you feel, though." I agreed with Mashiro wholeheartedly, but that didn't stop me from admonishing her.

We'd spent the entire day going around tourist spots. I couldn't believe these two still had so much energy to spare. I didn't know why we couldn't just play cards instead of the complicated king game.

Whatever.

"Here, guys! I got some perfectly even sticks for you to draw!" Takamiya announced.

"Yay." There was no way they'd actually be even. Could it be any more obvious that she'd rigged this specifically so that Ozu and Maihama could get into some juicy situations?

For the moment, I feigned ignorance and clapped to show my approval. Tonight, I was acting as a spy on behalf of the girls. Hopefully Ozu wouldn't think badly of me. I was trying to get him some action, after all.

Three of us in the room made eye contact. Takamiya grinned. Mashiro nodded. I gave a quiet, verbal response: "Mm."

We had hatched our plot over LIME, and the preparations were now complete.

The king game was exceedingly simple: Everyone drew lots. One of those had the word "king" written on it, and the others were numbered. The person who drew "king" had to then give orders to the numbers. It was a game enjoyed by men and women, girls and boys all over, though whether actual kings played it was unclear.

Each player's number remained a secret, meaning the king couldn't go too far in their orders, but nor were they required to feel guilty if something went awry. It also meant they could give orders they wouldn't normally dare if they knew who they were going to... Y'know what, who cares about the rules, really. They're all over the internet if you're desperate to look them up in more detail. Moving on.

Our plan was way more important, so I'll explain that.

Mashiro, Takamiya, Maihama, and I were going to attempt to fiddle with the numbers and the king's orders. The game was supposed to be random, but we were making sure it wasn't, precisely so that we could force Maihama and Ozu to get into some lovey-dovey situations together. I know it's tacky; you don't have to say it.

“Takamiya-san. It looks like your phone’s running out of charge.” Ozu said.

“No way, really? Damn, you must have amazing vision if you can see from all the way over there!”

“I’ve got 20/10 vision.”

“So you’ve got eyes like a hawk! Why’s no one calling you Captain Falcon?!”

“Maybe because a hawk and a falcon aren’t the same animal,” I pointed out. Misinformation was still misinformation, no matter how enthusiastically it was shared.

“I’m still impressed,” Takamiya continued. “I thought computer nerds were s’posed to have crap vision.”

“I know that spending a long time staring at a screen raises your risk for vision problems,” Ozu said. “That’s why I’m extra careful about it.”

“Whoa! Now *that’s* smart!”

“Aha ha ha, nah, you’re exaggerating. Anyway, pass me your phone. I’ll charge it for you.”

“Thankies!”

Ozu took Takamiya’s phone from her and plugged it into his charger.

I froze. Would he see her LIME messages?

But he barely even glanced at the screen.

“Here.”

“Thanks!”

And then he passed it back to her.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Shall we get started, then?” Takamiya suggested.

With that, our rigged king game finally began.

“Who’s the king?!” we shouted in unison, drawing our lots.

“Hey, it’s me! Wow, talk about a coincidence! Could I be any *luckier*, drawing king on the first round without even cheating?”

Just as planned, Takamiya was the first king. Her acting skills were among the worst I’d ever seen, but I guess I could let her off. She wasn’t an actress, after all, so I was happy to just call her attempt “charming” and leave it at that. Luckily, we didn’t live in the world of a certain gambling manga where your fingers would get cut off if they found out you were cheating.

Anyway, I’d drawn number three.

“What should I go for? Maybe the internet’ll have some ideas for me! Let’s see!” Takamiya started pretending to scroll through her charging phone.

“Could you hurry up? Just choose whatever,” I said, tapping

through my own phone impatiently while I waited. Or pretending to, at least. No prizes for guessing that I was actually enacting our plan.

Step one: mess with the sticks the players drew so that Takamiya was guaranteed to get king. Step two: Mashiro, Maihama, Suzuki, and myself would then send our numbers to her over LIME. Then Takamiya could make Ozu and Maihama do something couple-like.

Suzuki was a late addition to our unscrupulous team. Though I was worried he might blab, we really needed everyone but Ozu onside for this to work. He was doing a decent job at being subtle right now, so for the moment we were fine.

“I’ve made up my mind!” Takamiya said, confident. “Number one has to kiss number three! Passionately! Whaddya think of that?!”

“Nooo, number two has to kiss someone? But I can’t! I—wait?” Maihama blinked.

“Huh?” The rest of us blinked too, completely blindsided.

Something didn’t add up, right? It wasn’t just me? I exchanged a glance with Mashiro, Maihama, and Suzuki to check. They looked just as confused as I. An air of awkwardness began to spread through the room.

“W-Wait, what’s up with you guys? Number one has to passionately kiss number three! If that’s you, stop being a coward and put your hand up!” Takamiya had lost none of her energy, apparently unaware of the reason behind our bewilderment.

Apart from anything else, she should know that we *were* cowards. That was why we were rigging this game.

“Huh, weird. Are you sure there was a one and a three on the sticks?” Ozu asked, his face a picture of pure innocence.

We couldn’t keep quiet at this point, or he was only going to get more suspicious. I gave in and raised my hand.

“I’m...number three.”

“What?” Takamiya stared, finally as perplexed as the rest of us.

It seemed my admission gave the other person the courage to step forward.

“And I’m...one,” Mashiro said, putting her hand in the air.

“What?! Did I mess up somehow?! I mean— *What?!?*” Takamiya looked at her phone again. She was being way too obvious about the whole cheating thing right now, but I could understand that she wanted to check she hadn’t misread something. The trick was so simple, it should take some real incompetence to mess up. Making a mistake seemed like the more difficult thing to do.

“Asuka-chan,” Maihama said. “Don’t you think ordering people to kiss is a little much?”

I agreed with her completely. Even if it had gone to Maihama and Ozu, forcing them to kiss was way over the line. I’d been expecting

something with a much lower bar.

Takamiya laughed, scratching at her cheek, feeling awkward. "It was the first round. I wanted to start off the game with a bang!"

"What makes you think you can just do whatever you want?" Maihama muttered.

"W-Well, look, it worked out fine in the end, right? Since one and three are a couple anyway!"

"I guess... They've been going out for long enough too."

Mashiro was trembling, her cheeks burning and her gaze stuck to the floor. I had no idea what sort of face I was making. I could hazard a guess, but I wasn't sure I'd get it right.

We may have been "going out for long enough" in the girls' eyes, but in practical terms, we had zero experience of being in a proper relationship, even outside the one we had with each other. I'd never kissed anybody. I'd never even hugged anyone. But to try and deflect this now would raise suspicions; the die was already cast.

Maybe this was punishment. Even if I thought it was in Ozu's best interest to gain some experience with a girl, I'd still assisted in a plot that would essentially back him into a corner—and that wasn't right. Maybe the gods were telling me to cut it out already. Not that I was religious.

"Mashiro. I'm ready."

The order was clear. Number one was to kiss number three—passionately. I was the receiver here. Mashiro had to be the one to make the move. Though it pained me to push this massive burden onto her, hopefully she'd forgive me.

"Go ahead. Do whatever you want!" I said, sitting cross-legged, facing in her direction, and closing my eyes. I inhaled deeply and steadied my breathing. I needed to free myself of worldly thought and desire. I needed to be in a meditative state.

We had spent the day visiting the shrines and temples of ancient Kyoto, an itinerary which should have imparted unto me the very essence of what a class trip was all about. Supposing it had been a successful endeavor, then I was the singular person here who had become one with the class trip.

"Okay." I heard Mashiro's voice from beyond the blackness of my vision. "I'll get ready too..."

"S-Sure."

None of our other group members made a sound; they must have been watching with bated breath. At this very moment, it was as though Mashiro and I were in a world all of our own.

I felt somebody shifting closer. I could tell it was her from her breathing and her scent. She rushed the approach slightly, and her breaths were uneven. She was nervous.

Sorry you got wrapped up in this, Mashiro. If only we hadn't agreed to go along with Takamiya's half-assed plan...

I stopped my thought there, realizing what I was thinking. I was framing this whole thing as though it were a punishment, but that wasn't fair. Mashiro loved me. The context didn't matter; this was her first kiss, something that should have been very important to her. I couldn't imagine that she'd want to waste a precious experience like that on something so dumb.

"Mashiro," I said quickly. "You don't have to force—"

"You don't think I have the guts?"

"Huh?"

"I'm strong enough to take responsibility when I mess up," Mashiro asserted.

The very next second, I felt it. The soft coolness of her lips. Surprise forced my eyelids open. I saw Mashiro's face, right in front of me. In contact with my own. I wasn't dreaming either; this was reality. There was no punch line, like it was actually a popsicle or anything either.

Mashiro was kissing me. A real, unmistakable kiss.

After a few seconds of pressing her warm lips against me, Mashiro pulled away gently. Then she turned to our classmates, who were watching in amazement.

"A kiss on the cheek is still a kiss," Mashiro said. "You're not gonna convince me otherwise."

That's when it hit me: it was just as she'd said. Mashiro had kissed me on the cheek, not on my lips. I'd been so surprised by her lips on me in the first place, I'd forgotten to specify.

"You're fine with that too, right, Aki?"

"R-Right..."

I knew what she was really asking: for me to confirm that her kiss hadn't crossed the line too much, and had stayed on just the right side of romantic. I agreed with her without really thinking about it, but the truth was, I still wasn't sure how I should be reacting. It was like she'd said: a kiss on the cheek is still a kiss; she'd still kissed me.



My heart was still jumping up and down and refusing to still, while my brain was trying to work out how exactly Mashiro's kiss differed from one on the lips. I only needed to examine the state I was in right now to realize that *where* she kissed me didn't really matter at all.

There was no way the other players could tell us it didn't count.

"Wh-Whoooooooooooo! Nice one! I could totally see the passion and everything!" Takamiya was beside herself with excitement. Clearly, she thought it counted. Very much.

"That was awesome!" Suzuki presented us with a tearful thumbs-up.

Maihama was staring at us like a starstruck maiden. "Th-That was wonderful! Not what I'd expected but...truly wonderful..."

Maybe a little too late, I started feeling self-conscious under the stares of our group mates. It must have caught up to Mashiro too; her face turned red all the way to her ears, and she turned her gaze downwards, like she was retreating into her shell.

An innocent couple, accidentally the subject of an otherwise outrageous order. When you put it like that, this king game ended much more peacefully than it otherwise might have. But it was no coincidence; it had been entirely by design.

"Hey, Aki. Y'know, when it comes to romance, your IQ tends to drop by a lot." Ozu—who I could only presume was the mastermind behind this whole thing—looked at me and grinned.

My phone buzzed with a LIME message.

OZ: So you wanted to trick me, and chose...phones.

The message came with a screenshot from a group chat involving Mashiro, Takamiya, Maihama, Suzuki, and me.

I couldn't believe it! This guy set up a fake group chat that included Takamiya's account, then hacked her phone just as we were making *our* cheating group chat so that she couldn't see the real one! Then he'd just sent her random numbers in the fake chat instead! And then, he took her phone to charge in order to show me that he had the *opportunity* to interfere, but then gave it back so quickly that I thought he couldn't have done anything, which then made me relax my guard and— I don't even know what I'm saying anymore.

The details didn't really matter. At the end of the day, Ozu got us good.

"Okay, let's get on to the next round now!"

"W-Wait, Takamiya! We can't! It's too dangerous!"

"C'mon, Aki, look how excited she is. You really wanna be the wet

blanket in this situation?”

“Hngh!”

Ozu’s calm, assertive comeback silenced me. I could always tell everyone we’d been caught and put an end to this, but I could only imagine how much embarrassment that’d cause Maihama. That didn’t change the fact that Ozu had already found out what we were up to, but I didn’t want Maihama to be hit by that realization. It was too cruel.

There was no way out of this but to let Ozu use his newfound powers to enact his revenge.

After that, Takamiya drew king again and continued to make Mashiro and me do all sorts of lovey-dovey things, over and over and... Nah, I’m kidding. Her wild instincts eventually picked up on the fact that something was off, and she toned down her dares for us. (I knew she had the potential to mess with us much further, but it seemed she was entertained enough just having us do low-key stuff. I was glad *someone* here was able to enjoy Ozu’s revenge, at least).

“This... This doesn’t make sense. Why are only Ooboshi-kun and Tsukinomori-san getting picked?” Though utterly confused, Maihama never picked up on the fact that Ozu had detected our scheme, which was probably just as well. And probably down to Mashiro and me protecting her blissful ignorance.

“Heh heh. The king game isn’t so bad... It lets us flirt all we want without consequences...” Even Mashiro started to enjoy herself, forgetting that we weren’t exactly in a private setting.

All’s well that ends well...I guess?

“I’m sorry for laying that trap for you, Ozu.”

“It’s cool. That was a pretty juicy kiss you shared with Tsukinomori-san. It was great having a front-row seat.”

“Hngh... Are you really sure about that?”

“Why?”

“I didn’t think you’d like the idea of Mashiro and me getting closer.”

“Well, yeah. I’m definitely on Team Iroha.”

“So what gives?”

“I just like seeing you flailing in the presence of a girl.”

“Some friend *you* are...”

Chapter 6: I'm Horrible to the Girl with a Crush on My Friend

It was the dead of night. The only two light sources in our room were the small lamp on the veranda table, and my phone as I stayed up reading manga. It was past lights-out. Things had gotten pretty crazy with the girls around, but we were all the type to value our sleep hygiene, so we split and got ready for bed before we could get caught staying up.

I guess if I were living in manga world, it'd be possible that I'd have to squeeze into a bed with a girl and stay as silent as possible while our hearts beat like drums, just so that we wouldn't get caught by the patrolling teacher—but I lived in the real world where that kind of stuff just didn't happen.

I was starting to doubt the lingering sensation of Mashiro's lips against my cheek was even real, but...I decided the best thing to do was not to think about it.

The room was so quiet right now, you'd think our gathering had never happened. The only sound was Suzuki's snoring, which sounded like the grunting of a hibernating bear in its cave. Other than that, it was a peaceful night.

I sat up in my bed and looked towards the veranda. Ozu was sitting there, sipping some tea and looking out over the darkened city. The way he was facing away from me looked like he was waiting for me. I guess I did owe him an explanation.

I glanced at the bed next to me. Suzuki was fast asleep, his arms and legs outstretched. It didn't look like he'd be waking up any time soon.

So I stood up. I pulled the can of tomato juice I'd bought earlier from the fridge and went to sit next to Ozu.

"Sorry about before, Ozu. I wasn't trying to be mean."

"I was, though, the way I reacted. Sorry, Aki."

"I guess we're both at fault then?"

"Yeah. So let's forget about it."

"Sure."

I clinked my can of juice against his teacup, something we always did when making up after a fight. The whole thing might have seemed innocent, but Ozu never actively used his programming skills unless he was angry.

There was something I still didn't understand, though. I often thought Ozu could do with some more friends, or even a girlfriend, but up till now, nothing I'd ever done to that end had made him mad. I had no idea what it was that had ticked him off this time.

"By the way, I'm not mad at *you*, Aki."

"Then why *are* you mad?"

"I don't think I'm really mad at all. I guess I'm...disappointed? Anxious? I think it's something along those lines, but I'm having a hell of a time trying to analyze these feelings." Ozu shrugged. "D'you think you could stop trying to pair me up with Maihama-san?"

"You're not interested in her?"

"No." Ozu answered without hesitation, with the speed of a computer running a calculation.

"How can you be so sure? You're not into the bookworm types?"

"Aha ha ha. I know enough about science to know there's more to a human than just being logic- or feelings-based. Just so we're clear, Maihama-san herself isn't the issue."

"What is, then?"

"I can't date anybody. I don't think...I should be that close to anybody yet." Though Ozu smiled, the cold moonlight reflecting from the window seemed to suck the spirit from it.

I shook my head, as if to convince myself I was just seeing things. "There's nothing to worry about. I personally think you're ready to take the next step."

"I guess I can see that, compared to the past. But I still feel like I'm missing something when it comes to understanding other people's emotions. Something important."

"It's impossible to understand another person perfectly. No one can do it. Not me, not Iroha, not Mashiro, Sumire-sensei, or Makigai Namako-sensei. It's wrong to treat communication skills as something binary."

"Yeah, I agree. But I'm still way closer to zero than one."

"I know you're struggling on the class trip, since you haven't got enough data for it. But I promise you're pulling it off, to the extent that most people would probably just think you're tired or something. It's all thanks to your efforts to fit in when we're at school."

"Right. I'm good at wearing a mask." Ozu paused. "Do you think Maihama-san would still like me if she knew the real me?"

"Hell if I know."

Ozu laughed. "You're too mean, Aki. To everyone except me."

"Maybe I am."

"You were trying to use Maihama-san as a guinea pig. If things went south between us, it wouldn't matter. So long as it meant I was a step closer to one day finding a girlfriend I could open my heart to."

“I won’t deny that. She’s a classmate I’m not that close to, and you’re my friend. It’s obvious whose life I value more.”

Of course, I wouldn’t complain if the two of them *did* end up living happily ever after. That was the best outcome here. But what if I could only pick one?

There’s a thought experiment called the trolley problem. It goes like this:

A runaway trolley is approaching a junction in the track, and you’re the only person with access to the lever that can change its path. On one of the tracks there are five people and on the other, only one. If you do nothing, the trolley will keep on its path, and kill those five people. If you pull the lever, it will follow the other track, and kill only one.

I always thought it was a stupid problem.

If you truly cared about someone, you’d risk your life to save them, but if these six people were unrelated to you, you probably wouldn’t care who the trolley killed.

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think that’s a very heroic or natural way of thinking about it, but that’s what *I* think. Which is also why I don’t see any problem with Maihama and Ozu dating temporarily, even if it was likely she’d get hurt. Because it would help Ozu achieve happiness in the long term.

“There’s a chance you two might be really happy together. Even end up married,” I added. “You’d have a fifty percent chance of things working out then, same as every couple. And even if Maihama’s happy to just get to date a hot guy for a while, I think it’ll be worth it for her too.”

“A hot guy? Yeah. I’m not hot.”

I sighed. “I thought we promised we wouldn’t talk about the past? Or has this ancient city put you in the mood for nostalgia?”

“Aha ha ha. Maybe that’s it.” Ozu grinned.

It was a shame he didn’t realize it himself. How much progress it was for him to be able to reflect and even *consider* dating Maihama. That in itself showed he should be ready to take the plunge.

I could understand why he was nervous, though. Anyone who knew him back in junior high—and that included himself, of course—would want him to think twice about this. That was how “abnormal” Kohinata Ozuma used to be.

“It’s kinda scary, sifting through emotions like this. Makes me wanna talk about the past.”

“Count me in.”

I paused. “I guess we can make an exception then. Just for tonight.”

One of them had neat golden hair and was handsome enough that

you'd think somebody had crafted him based on a model from a fashion magazine. The other was the opposite: a young boy gloomy enough that he blended right in with the shadows.

It's been a long time, Kohinata.

The step up from elementary to junior high school came as somewhat of a shock, like the entire world had shifted around me. The boys from my old class were suddenly calling themselves rebels, and the girls, who I once knew to be very sensible, were suddenly dyeing their hair, clamoring all about the latest fashion trends. All of this happened over the spring vacation, a time period of only two weeks.

The snot-faced girls and boys who used to love playing soccer and tag were now going to karaoke, obsessing over their appearance, and dating each other as if they'd been at it for years, and it pissed me off. I watched as kids, confused by their friends' sudden transformations, gradually started to change in the same ways, just to stay close to them.

I truly believed they were idiots for doing so. Actually, that wasn't quite right. It wasn't that I thought less of them; it was a more visceral reaction than that. Seeing them made me want to throw up.

The classroom was a bucket of water, once pure, which was now being dyed by the black ink that was slowly being dripped into it. But no matter how much time passed, there was one spot within the classroom that remained clear, and it naturally caught my attention.

There was a single student unaffected by his peers. He never interacted with them. He was just *there*. His hair grew out free and wild, like unkempt grass. His face never held even a hint of emotion, like a puppet. His uniform was covered in creases. He never bothered to clean the graffiti from his desk, an inheritance from the previous user. He just sat there, hunched over, completely absorbed in something.

That something could be a book. When it was, it was something technical I couldn't understand. I only learned afterwards that they were books on engineering.

That something could be his laptop. He would program on it, holding a complex conversation between him and his machine.

That something could be a device. Specifically, something he made himself from circuits and parts I'd never seen in any store. The things he created were like little robots.

"What are you doing?"

When I first spoke to him, it wasn't because I was struck by his talent or anything dramatic like that. I was simply curious. I just wanted to know why he spent his time in the classroom doing all this

weird stuff.

“I’m working out the quickest way for people to die.”

His answer came out of left field, and I had no idea how to react at first.

“Huh?”

“I’m looking for the quickest way for people to die. After school.”

He explained in more detail. It didn’t help.

He already seemed bored by our conversation, immediately turning back to the task he’d been engaged in.

One of our classmates had witnessed the exchange and, worried, called me out to the hallway to tell me about the mysterious boy. That was when I learned his name: Kohinata Ozuma. This kid had known Kohinata since elementary school, and went on to tell me all about his background.

Kohinata was a genius, the youngest boy ever to win the Japan Mathematical Olympiad. However, he never showed any interest in mixing with those around him, let alone starting a conversation. Any attempt to talk to him yourself led to him saying something scary, as I’d just experienced for myself. He seemed to have no interest in how he was perceived; his uniform and hair were always scruffy, making him unapproachable.

Apparently, he was often spotted in the science classrooms after school, but apart from that, the rumors about him were so wild that it was hard to know what was true.

To sum it up: he was a total outcast.

“So what I’m saying is, you shouldn’t talk to him, Ooboshi.”

No one spoke to him. I shouldn’t either.

This classmate’s warning came from an obvious hatred of Kohinata Ozuma, and in retrospect, I was actually hugely grateful to him. In some ways, he was the one who formed the 05th Floor Alliance.

I hated being told to do something simply because it was what everyone else did. Purely out of spite, I vowed there and then that I would become friends with Kohinata Ozuma, even if it killed me.

When school was over that day, I headed for the science classrooms. The labs themselves were locked, so instead, I went into the unlocked prep room next door. I’d never been around these rooms outside of lessons, let alone the prep room. It was completely unexplored territory. I wouldn’t even know what a “prep room” looked like, but even then, when I opened the door and stepped inside, I knew what I was looking at wasn’t normal.

There was a large box containing a miniature town. A school, buildings, a railroad, a residential area, a shopping district. There was even a river with real water running through it. The attention to detail

was mind-blowing.

Small chess piece-like figures were dotted all over the place, complete with simple heads and limbs. Presumably, they represented the town's people.

I was at once both impressed and curious—enough to reach out towards it.

“Don't touch that!” someone shouted, and I hurriedly pulled my hand back.

I turned around to see Kohinata, glowering at me with a bucket in his hand. He tossed the bucket to one side, rushed up to me, and shoved me hard.

“Ow! What the heck was that for?!” I stumbled backwards; he hadn't been strong enough to make me fall. I'd raised my voice in anger and glared at him, but my rage didn't last long.

What's up with this guy?

Even after pushing me, Kohinata seemed to have lost all interest, instead rushing to the boxed town and checking over every last inch of it in a panic.

Then, he sighed. “I scanned the data from a photograph of an airport to print out an accurate 3D replica. If the positions of these buildings, or the angles at which they're arranged got changed... A small, natural placement error wouldn't be so bad, but the results would get messed up if someone moved things. I'd appreciate it if you were more careful.”

“R-Right...”

Back then, I had no idea what he was talking about. The only thing I could just about work out was that this miniature town was important to him.

“Did you make this?” I asked.

“It's a recreation of this town at a scale of one to one-fifty, put together by one of the teachers. I just made the parts myself, and increased the accuracy of the recreation.”

“You're making this with one of the science teachers?”

“I'm allowed to do whatever I want to it. As long as I keep it a secret.”

As a totally average student, I never knew that being an honor student came with special perks like this. Though I guess when the youngest student ever to win the Japan Mathematical Olympiad shows an academic interest in something, as his teacher, you weren't going to say no.

“Oh, but I guess it's not a secret to you anymore,” Kohinata said. “Uh oh...”

“Nope. It's not like I'm gonna tell anyone, though.”

“The only option left is to kill you. Make sure you don't talk.”

“Think you could stop saying all that scary stuff outta nowhere?”

“I was just kidding. The inconvenience of losing this room versus the inconvenience of getting sent to prison for murdering you are incomparable; of course I’m not gonna kill you.”

“Sounds like you would if you were just a little more attached to this room.”

“So, mind getting outta here?”

“Way to be direct about it.”

This guy’s conversational skill was all straight lines and sharp edges. Ignoring all context, he wanted me gone, and so he said as much. Like a phone alarm set to go off at a certain time no matter what.

He ignored my comeback and started working on his project, picking up the bucket of water and placing it on a chair before connecting it to his model town with something that looked like an air hose.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“You still here?”

“There’s no way I’m leaving when you’re doing something this interesting. I won’t get in your way, okay?”

“I was working out the quickest way for people to die.”

“That again? What does it even mean?”

I’d lost the will to comment every time he said something weird. It was clear that he was like this all the time, so at this point I decided to just accept it.

“This is what it means,” Kohinata replied plainly, turning on the switch to his air hose.

Water from the bucket burst out of the hose and flooded the tiny town’s streets in the blink of an eye. The human-shaped pawns were swallowed up and swept away.

“No way. This is part of your research on killing people?”

Why did he need a perfect miniature replica of our town for that? Was this kid seriously looking into ways to deal catastrophic damage to people’s homes and businesses? Was I witnessing the birth of a future terrorist?

Maybe Kohinata Ozuma was more dangerous than I thought. *Way* more dangerous.

I glanced at his face.

“Off you go,” he murmured.

I blinked at the unexpected kindness in his expression. Kohinata had picked up the small robot, or device, or whatever it was he’d been tinkering with at his desk: a relatively simple contraption made from commercial parts. He then set it in the water.

I had no idea how he’d programmed that thing, but the robot

seemed to be calculating and taking the most efficient route as it went to retrieve the figures in the water, one by one.

"Is that thing rescuing them?" I asked.

"Yeah. Imagine a robot that could save people during a flood, using only its own programming, and information from the GPS. Doesn't that sound amazing? According to my calculations, it would be able to save more lives than current technology allows for." Kohinata paused. "Though this is just a toy. Once I make it bigger and run experiments with it, I'm sure there'll be more problems that need fixing." He turned to me and grinned. "It's doing great this time, though!"

It was the first time I'd seen Kohinata's eyes; they'd been covered by his long hair earlier. Before I knew it, I was bursting into laughter.

"Whaddya know? You're just a regular great guy!"

"Huh?"

"You told me you were researching fast ways for people to die, right? I was sure *you* were planning to do the killing."

"Really? I've been thinking about that question for ages, 'cause I thought the best way to run my experiment was under conditions where people would die the quickest."

"You should've explained that, then. Otherwise, people are gonna get the wrong idea about you."

"Maybe. I don't really care what other people think about me. Never have." Kohinata smiled awkwardly and scratched at his cheek.

His reaction made me realize I was right: the negative opinions the other kids had about him were flat-out wrong. The decision I made, to become his friend, was the right one.

"You need to clear your name, Kohinata. What you're doing here is incredible, and you seem like a great guy. We gotta make sure the other kids know that."

"Do we? I've already got the teacher who's letting me use this room, and you— Wait, what's your name anyway?"

"Ooboshi Akiteru."

"That's a long name. Kinda a waste of time to say the whole thing."

"You're really gonna be that picky over a name? It's not like I can change it." I sighed and gave it some thought, grinning when an idea flashed through my mind. "All right, you can call me Aki then. That's short and sweet enough for you, right?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"Then it's settled. In return, I'm gonna call you Ozu."

"You don't like wasting time either?"

"It's not that. I guess I prefer logical thinking, but I'm not as extreme as you."

I was totally average. I couldn't compare to Kohinata Ozuma, whose experiment, thought processes, speech, *everything* just oozed genius. I'd never in my wildest dreams achieve anything that he was capable of. He'd already proven as much during this short time getting to know him.

A thought struck. "I was thinking I'm gonna try and max out my efficiency. Just like you."

"Oh yeah?"

"I feel like I'll be able to understand you better that way. Become friends with you, when normally you're too...weird for that."

"I guess, if that's what you wanna do."

"It is...Ozu."

That was the moment I called Kohinata Ozuma by his nickname for the first time. It wasn't your typical tale, of two friends growing close enough that they naturally progressed to nicknames. It was something we'd decided together, that using shorter names was a path to more efficient communication.

After learning the importance of relationships and how they were perceived by others, and once I'd started becoming interested in people other than myself, I stopped assigning people nicknames for efficiency's sake. But even after all this time, "Ozu" and "Aki" had stuck.

"Anyway, Aki, like I was saying: I've got you, and the teacher who's lending me this room. As long as you two understand me, that's more than enough for me to be happy." Ozu smiled before returning to his work.

Once he was focused again, it was like he'd forgotten I'd even existed, and any conversation was over before it began. Far from making me feel left out, I really enjoyed silently watching Ozu's experiment come to life, more than I'd ever enjoyed anything before.

When Ozu and I had become friends, I started visiting that prep room almost every day after school. We barely spoke. I'd ask Ozu about anything new he'd made, and he would explain its purpose and mechanism. The rest of the time we spent together in silence. I would always remember how the only times the usually quiet Ozu seemed to get excited about something was when he spoke about his theories and inventions.

Our friendship was reserved, and neither of us had many friends apart from each other. But Ozu and I couldn't be happier.

"For a while, at least."

Ozu and I sat opposite each other on the hotel veranda, our gazes

on the silver moon as we relaxed and reminisced together.

"I never thought that science teacher'd end up betraying me; one outta two of the people I trusted," Ozu said, interrupting the memory I was verbally recalling. "My bad for not bothering to learn anything about human psychology, I guess."

"Wasn't it a matter of time, though?"

The memory pissed me off, even all these years later. I wound up bumping into that teacher a lot once I started visiting the prep room more often. At first I thought he was a nice guy; someone who understood us. But in the end, he turned out to be a total doormat: not brave enough to put the right boundaries in place for his genius student, and when that caused issues, he didn't have the courage to stand up for Ozu either.

When we reached our second year of junior high, Ozu became the target of the class delinquents, who'd become more confident in their role. They knew how to play dirty, and snitched to the vice principal about Ozu using the prep room, which ended up causing a huge mess. When the other teachers turned on him, the trusted science teacher put up no resistance. Instead, he had claimed that Ozu and I were using the room without his knowledge, then told us off and took away Ozu's space to experiment, just like that.

"I wonder if he knew that'd happen, and that's why he told you to keep it a secret. Though if you weren't supposed to be in there, he really should've told you from the start."

The teacher should have taken full responsibility for letting Ozu use the room, but instead flipped the blame onto us when things got dicey. Could you blame us for becoming disillusioned with society, after an adult treated us like that?

There was no way I'd let myself end up like that teacher. I acknowledged Ozu's genius, and *I* would hold on to my responsibility to the very end, and make sure society appreciated his talents too.

After that incident, Ozu continued to be bullied and get wrapped up in all kinds of trouble, while I did what I could to try and prevent it. Honestly, though, that's a period of our lives I'd rather forget. Don't think I'm about to walk the entire length of memory lane just because things are getting a little emotional out here.

"It's not like *I've* ever found you a space to carry out your experiments, though. Maybe I shouldn't be so critical," I said.

"But you kinda have. The gaming world's a lot of fun, y'know."

"It is kind of like a simulator, right? A box where you can implement your theories and ideas, and see how our players react to different conditions. The work you're doing now is easier for a layperson to understand, plus we can make money doing it. I thought it was a pretty neat idea, myself."

“I never imagined teaming up with other creators when I was by myself. Not that I could’ve done that by myself. I owe you a lot, Aki.”

“It was seriously tough trying to get your communication skills up to snuff at the same time, though.” I sighed and took a sip from my can. Only, there wasn’t any tomato juice in there anymore.

“But yeah. The point is, that’s who I *really* am. I was never ‘hot’ or anything. Just an antisocial geek. Maihama-san wouldn’t like me if she knew.”

“You sure about that? You might be jumping to conclusions, you know?”

For example, I’d had Suzuki Takeshi all wrong. No, it wasn’t just him. It was all the students I’d decided were too different from me, so I just slapped the label of “normie” on them and kept them at arm’s length where I never had the chance to see them for who they were.

I was confident Ozu had done that too. If only he mustered up the courage, I was sure he could take that next step and find himself a romantic relationship.

“I’m outta tea. Think I’m gonna go to bed.” Ozu yawned as he rose.

“Good idea. We’ve got another big day ahead tomorrow.” I got up after him.

I switched off the last of the light sources, plunging the room into total darkness, before carefully making my way back to bed.

For a while, I lay there, contemplating.

Ozu just needed the courage to take the next step, huh? And who was I to tell him that, really?

Okay, so I didn’t actually *say* that part at the end—I only thought it—but still. I made it sound so easy for him to “just go for it,” when I wasn’t capable of doing it myself.

As I pulled the duvet up over myself, I thought about girls. Two girls, in particular. Because apparently, I wasn’t decent enough to consider just one.

The first was Mashiro. My fake girlfriend who was in love with me. The girl whose lips I could still feel pressed against my cheek.

The other was Iroha. When I opened my phone and studied the cascade of LIME messages she’d bombarded me with, I was struck with a strangely painful thought.

“I wonder if Iroha’s been lonely all by herself.”

I’d only be gone a few days, but she *did* pester me on a near daily basis.

Did I really think myself that important to her? No, I probably wasn’t. But what if these messages *did* come from a place of loneliness?

“Courage...to take that first step. I guess it takes courage to open

myself up to being bullied for overthinking too.”

AKI: You’re lonely, right?

The read mark appeared almost at once, followed by Iroha’s response in the form of three consecutive stickers. The first was of a character rolling on the floor with laughter. The second was a character waving a dismissive hand. The third was a character pointing at me and laughing.

Iroha: Are you kidding me? I’m literally the queen bee of socialization. I have a hundred friends! And you think I’m lonely?!

Iroha: Lonely, just ‘cause I can’t see **you** of all people?!

Iroha: Upupu!

AKI: It’s not just me, though. Everyone’s here: Mashiro, Ozu, Sumire-sensei...

AKI: You’re the only one not in Kyoto. It’s only natural you’d feel lonely.

Iroha: Nice try, Einstein, but I *am* here!

Huh? Where was “here”? It couldn’t be Kyoto. She was trying to bait me so she could tease me, wasn’t she?

AKI: What are you talking about?

Iroha: Look forward to finding out ;)

What was with her? Seriously?

Iroha’s messages stopped there. Clearly she wasn’t planning on explaining anything. It crossed my mind to call her and bombard her with questions, but it was late and I was struggling to keep my eyes open. Slowly, my eyelids got heavier and my consciousness drifted away.

I guess none of it was that important.

Not as long as Iroha was happy.

“Our heart-to-heart got completely overshadowed by your sister’s nonsense, huh?”

“Eh, I guess that’s fine. Pretty sure that’s just what our customers were waiting for anyway. Probably.”

Interlude: Sumire and Midori

“Reality sure does suck! Why are these kids so damn boring?” I sighed as I traveled down the gloomy corridor.

It was late at night and I was walking down the hotel hallway with a flashlight, as was my teacherly duty. I was on patrol, out to find and scold those foolish teenagers who’d decided to break the rules and let loose, but not one of these goody-two-shoes was out of bed! How the hell was I supposed to know which guys were pairing up with which girls or guys, or which girls were pairing up with which guys or girls?!

At least give me *one room* where I could catch a naughty pair, screaming at me and apologizing. Was a lady not allowed to dream anymore?

If I was being honest, though, I had no idea what I was supposed to do if I *did* run into something like that. I was equal parts disappointed and relieved.

“Guess I’ll hit the sack myself, then. Be nice to grab a drink before that, though...”

Nothing hit the spot after a long day at work better than an ice-cold beer. As proven by the university research lab in my brain, having a beer before bed increased my energy the following morning (just don’t fact-check that).

I always had a beer on a work night, but I couldn’t do that on this class trip. There were a few other teachers on this trip: the homeroom teachers for each class, and the head of year. The rooms for staff were split between male and female, so I shared my room with two other teachers. I couldn’t get blind-stinking drunk and let my colleagues see what I was like at home!

As long as I was on this trip, I had to abstain...but I was still dying for a drink, dammit!

And another thing. Why was I, a teacher, being made to patrol the hotel hallways at night by myself anyway? You’d think this place could hire some security guards or something, ’cause I was pretty sure this wasn’t in my job description. I didn’t even know what I was supposed to do if I ran into a ghost or a suspicious weirdo.

“...do...”

Uh.

What was that?

“...Do...I...”

I could hear a raspy whisper. And it didn't come from me. So who was it?

It was coming from one corner of the girls' floor, where there were some vending machines and a small bench.

C-Could it really be a ghost?!

I mean, ghosts didn't exist, right? Right? Right? *Right?!*

Okay, calm down... You're still the Venomous Queen, even if there aren't any students or other teachers around. And the Venomous Queen wouldn't lose her cool over some random ghost!

I took a deep breath. I was a queen. A powerful queen. A calm queen. A teacher.

Okay, I was *her* now. I'd convinced myself. And now I wasn't gonna embarrass myself. Probably not, at least.

No longer allowing myself to be daunted, I approached the vending machines and turned my flashlight towards the bench.

“Who's there?” I tried to keep my tone firm, but my voice quivered a little at the end. At least it didn't outright crack.

The girl I saw there was the last person I'd expected to see. She looked up at me and met my gaze.

“Sumire...”

I could count on one hand the people who'd call me that on this trip.

“Midori-chan?” I gasped, accidentally calling her by her first name even though I was working.

It was Kageishi Midori. I couldn't believe it.

Her hair wasn't tied up with its trademark ribbon, but let down. I was guessing that was because she'd just come from the baths. That didn't stop me from recognizing her, though; she was my sister.

It took me a moment or two to find my voice. “What are you doing here? You're not allowed to leave your room after lights-out. You never break the rules, so what's the matter?” I was scolding her. I was asking her.

Kageishi Midori had three modes when it came to rules: respect, follow, and enforce. That went for the law, of course, as well as unwritten rules, house rules, manners, even the smallest of promises. She followed them all down to a ridiculous T, and had the most ironclad self-discipline of anybody I knew. It was all part of what made her an outstanding honor student.

What was *she* doing wandering the hallways after lights-out? And with a can of hot chocolate in her hand no less! What terrible thing had happened to drive Midori-chan to consuming sugar and caffeine in the middle of the night?!

“I'm...bad, Sumire.”

“What?!”

“I mean, look at me. I’m breaking the rules. I’m irredeemable. Despicable. There’s no escaping that. Sumire, are you disappointed?” Midori-chan asked, teary-eyed.

“Wait a second. If something’s bothering you, I’ll lend you my ear. But at the moment, I can’t keep up,” I said, anxious. I sat down next to Midori-chan, trying to pull off an expression that sat somewhere between my strict teacher persona, and my concerned sisterly one. “Would you explain to me so I can understand? Take as much time as you need.”

“Okay...” Midori-chan replied, subdued. “But bear in mind that this is about the friend of a friend’s friend.”

I hear you loud and clear, Midori-chan. It’s totally about you.

“My friend’s friend’s friend has a friend with a boyfriend, and *she* asked this girl to support their relationship. But it turned out that the relationship was fake.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a secret, however. Nobody knows apart from a select portion of their friend group. When the girl went to the Fushimi Inari-taisha, something happened to make the fake boyfriend tell her everything.”

“I see...”

This was obviously about Aki and Mashiro-chan. Literally no one else in the world would bother with a fake relationship. And the Fushimi Inari-taisha was on their route today, right? I wasn’t convinced Midori-chan was *actually* trying to hide who were involved here.

“Then this girl started having some curious feelings...”

“What?”

“Every time she closes her eyes, she sees the face of this boy—this fake boyfriend—no matter what she does. Her chest throbs endlessly. It just won’t stop.” Midori-chan gasped, putting a hand to her heart over her yukata.

I gasped. There was no way that pain was faked.

“Until then, she’d been suppressing those feelings, knowing she wasn’t allowed to have them. To have improper feelings towards her friend’s lover... That thought was too horrendous for her to allow into her mind. But what if her friend *wasn’t* actually dating him? Then I’d have a chance. And so she decided to ask her friend directly.”

She literally just said “I.” Pointing that out at this point’d be tasteless, though.

This whole thing was too much. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t imagine the weight of her feelings either; I’d never ever been properly in love myself. All I knew was my sister was in pain, and I needed to take this seriously.

“When she asked her friend if her relationship was fake, the friend looked like the rug had been pulled from beneath her. I suppose that’s not surprising...”

“No. Secrets are secrets for a reason.”

“I know. It was reprehensible of the girl to confront her friend like that, and yet she couldn’t help it. She *had* to know. If she hadn’t confirmed the truth for herself there and then, she may well have lost her mind.”

“Midori-chan...”

Kageishi Midori was an intelligent, kindhearted girl. She had a very high understanding of the consequences of her actions, including how they might hurt others. I wasn’t just saying that because she was my sister; her achievements and altruistic activities at the various schools she’d attended over the years spoke for themselves. If Midori-chan said she couldn’t help but ask, then I believed her.

“I’ve never been faced with such an agonizing problem before. Sensei, what should I do? What’s the right way forward?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but hesitated. My answer here could change everything.

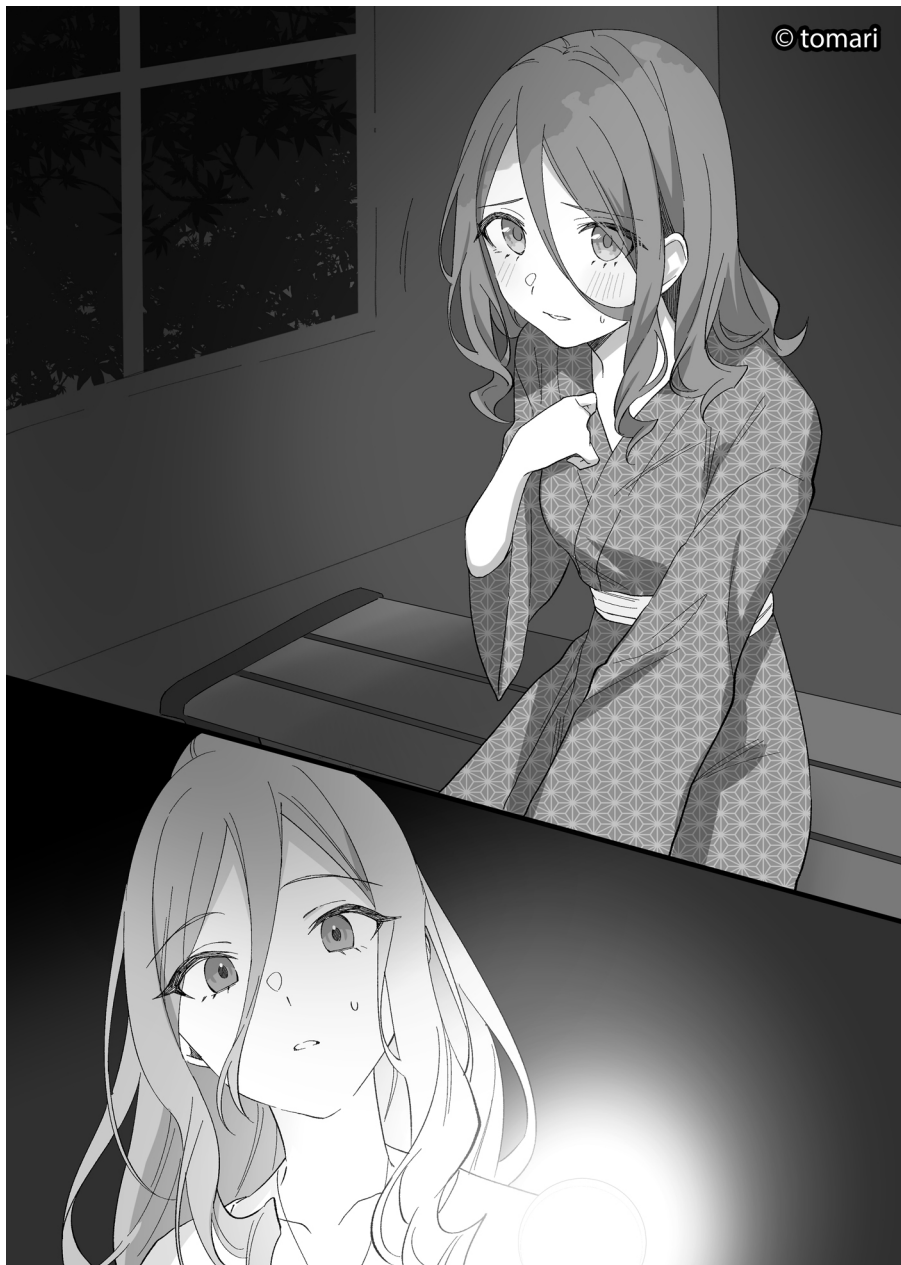
I could tell Midori-chan to reject her feelings and give up.

Or.

I could forget about Mashiro-chan’s feelings and support my sister.

Were the gods massive bullies or what? Why did *I* have to be the one to make this choice?!

I cursed myself for being so indecisive. I bet the Venomous Queen would know exactly what to do right now, and that her decision would be ruthless.



But she wasn't me. Not really. *I* was Kageishi Sumire. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. A weak-willed woman who couldn't decide if she wanted to be a teacher or an illustrator.

"There is no right and wrong. It's all the same. Answers change. Something that is correct one day can become incorrect later down the line. That's the kind of unreasonable problem you're facing here."

I was two-faced, and so was my answer. I hid away from the decision, and now whatever happened was entirely up to the girls themselves. I was powerless to do anything, and so I decided not to get involved. To let them choose their own paths, and race down them with everything they had.

"You should do what you want. You have that freedom."

"Sumire..."

Midori-chan was so pure, she believed anything I said with a straight face. Even if my "advice" was essentially meaningless, like just now.

"All right. I'll consider how to move forward in a way that causes the least regret." Midori-chan stood up. She pulled open the tab on her hot chocolate, downed it, then flung the empty can into the—sorry, walked up to the trashcan and nicely deposited it. "I'm sorry for wandering the hallways at night, Kageishi-sensei. I'll return to my room now. As for my punishment—"

"It is a teacher's duty to listen to their students' troubles no matter the time of day. This time, it just so happened to be in the dead of night. If you feel like that means you've done something wrong, then hurry off back to bed as quickly as you can."

"Y-Yes, ma'am. Thank you." After a polite bow, Midori-chan went scampering off down the hallway.

Watching her go, I let out a deep, ugly sigh. Probably not the most elegant way to describe it near my sister, but it wasn't like I'd said it out loud, and she was way out of earshot by now. Let me off?

I always thought this would happen at some point. I guess the time was now. It was painful enough to know that only one of Iroha-chan or Mashiro-chan would be able to find happiness with Aki, and though I was rooting more for Mashiro-chan because she was the one who ended up confiding in me directly, so far I'd gotten away with only feeling a *little* bit guilty.

"Now my own sister's getting involved and I'm still s'posed to be rooting for Mashiro-chan? This is a total mess!"

Faced with a harsh reality, the desire that bubbled up from deep inside me was something that no teacher worth their salt should ever wish for. The only reason I said it out loud was because I was sure there'd be loads of people out there who'd agree with me.

“Can’t they just all compromise and be a harem?”

Chapter 7: Me, My Friend's Little Sister, and Kiyomizu-dera

"I messed up..."

The moment I woke up, I was filled with a sharp pang of regret at the lukewarm sensation in my palm.

Morning sunlight and birdsong filtered in from beyond the window.

I had seriously messed up. Misled by the magic of the class trip, I'd lost my inhibitions.

This was bad. I mean, *really* bad.

I had forgotten to charge my phone.

I'd fallen asleep while messaging Iroha on LIME, and forgotten to plug my phone back in. The day had only just started, and it already had barely any juice left. For the time being, I decided to plug it into the adapter Ozu had lent me, but I doubted it'd be able to charge enough during the short window we had for breakfast, and before we'd go out again.

"Ngh... Aki? What's up?"

"Hey, Ozu." I turned around to see he was now awake. The ends of his golden hair were disheveled, and his eyes unfocused. There was a toothbrush in his mouth. "Did you bring a power bank with you?"

"No, I didn't think I needed one if I just charged everything to full overnight. I'm already carrying a couple phones with me, so I didn't wanna add a heavy battery to the mix."

"Right..."

"If your phone runs out, though, just let me know. I'll lend you one of mine."

"Thanks, I will."

There was no need to panic. I'd charge my phone as much as I could before we went, and then I could rely on Ozu if I needed to borrow one. I'd be with him the entire day, after all.

And so began the second day of the class trip, already off to a faulty start. Today, our group was heading to Kiyomizu-dera Temple.

When we got out of the taxi, we had a view that embodied traditional Japan itself, bordered by the vast nature of Mt. Otowa.

There was a marked difference in the air quality here compared to the city. Breathing it in felt like I was adding three years to my life. There was a magical atmosphere about the place that was oddly reassuring too, like a single ring of one of the temple bells would purge the entire surrounding area of all wicked thoughts and evil spirits.

“We’re finally at Kiyomizu-dera! This is the all-important place that will decide my future with Kohinata-kun.”

“Marriage...” Mashiro snickered. “This is my chance... I’m not losing to Iroha-chan!”

Hold up. Maybe our group was going to be the *reason* this place needed purifying. The girls were looking especially terrifying today.

I watched as Mashiro spun around and trotted towards me. I didn’t even have time to brace myself before she grabbed my arm. “U-Uh, Mashiro? We’re in public...”

“I-I don’t wanna get split up...”

“I guess there *are* a heck ton of tourists around.”

The crowds were way bigger than the ones we’d seen at the tourist spots yesterday. There was a rumor that this temple could aid in your love life, and there was that famous idiom of “jumping off the stage at Kiyomizu.” These numbers were probably attracted by the combined force of those urban myths.

“Love stones. The Otowa waterfall. This place is full of legends about finding true love and fulfilling wishes. It’s the perfect tourist spot for any girl looking for love.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to cling to me in public, does it?”

“Shut up. This might be my one chance.”

Mashiro had her arms wrapped around me like a sea anemone, and it didn’t seem like she was planning to let go any time soon. Naturally, I wasn’t *unhappy* to have a cute girl like her on my arm, but I wasn’t exactly comfortable with the icy glares we were getting from the other members of our group. Maybe it was because of the king game last night, but Mashiro seemed to be more assertive than ever.

Even when we had been traveling in the taxis, separated by gender, she kept messaging me on LIME as though she couldn’t bear to be apart from me. I felt bad ignoring her, so I had replied, and thanks to that my phone’s battery was slowly but surely approaching its last legs.

“Wait, I just remembered there’s this crazy rumor about this temple!” Takamiya exclaimed, making me tune in to her conversation.

“What sort of rumor?” Maihama asked innocently.

“Any couple that goes on a date here is destined to break up!”

“I thought this place was famous for helping you *find* true love?”

“Yeah, for people who *aren’t* in relationships. If you are, it’s

splitsville! Isn't it hilarious how that literally makes no sense?!"

"That reminds me—I think there's a god out there that gets jealous over harmonious couples. I suppose those sorts of gods reside at temples offering true love too? But Kohinata-kun and I should be fine, since we're not technically dating yet!"

"Oh, but it's just a rumor, y'know? Go ahead, Mashiro-chin, be all cozy with Ooboshi-kun if you want. It's no big—deal?!"

"Come within ten meters of me and you're dead."

"Ten *meters*? At least make it centimeters..."

Just like that, Mashiro was treating me like her worst enemy again. She'd promptly unhooked herself from my arm and was now glaring at me from a distance, like I was something she'd found stuck to her shoe.

Was it bad that I was actually *relieved* she was treating me like this? It was way more in-character for her than being overly clingy.

The distance was because she wanted us to remain close. She didn't hate me. She did not. There was nothing for me to get worked up over. Pull it together, Akiteru.

"Hey, Ooboshi," Suzuki called. "Somethin' happen?"

"You can tell?"

"Yeah, kinda... I mean, Tsukinomori-san is standing, like, a hundred miles away from you."

"Ten meters. That's the distance we're supposed to keep from each other."

"She hate you now or something?"

"No, she's head over heels for me. Or so I gather."

"What?"

Suzuki's reaction was right on the money: utter confusion. Reality was often stranger than fiction. You know when the main character is trying to explain something, and no one believes him? That was me just now.

The only difference is, I'm not cool enough to be a protagonist.

"I messed up..."

Twenty minutes later, I was wrapped up in confusion and despair. I had the sense this wasn't the first time I was saying that today, but I was probably just imagining things. My face, reflected in the pitch black screen of my dead phone, was the picture of pure patheticness.

I looked to my right. There was an adult Japanese couple enthusiastically taking a photo together. Tourists, presumably.

I looked to my left. There was an adult foreign couple putting

their hands together and humbly watching the waterfall. Tourists, presumably.

Was it just me, or were the *foreign* tourists paying more respect to our Japanese traditions?

Nah, it was probably just a coincidence that I spotted a pair of outliers. ...Right? Yeah...

Anyway, I'd been looking around for some time now, but the only people I'd been seeing were anonymous strangers. You know what that means, right?

Yup. I was lost. Sucks to be me.

The rest of my group had disappeared. Mashiro, Ozu, Suzuki, Takamiya, Maihama—I couldn't see a single one.

I'd tried to call and arrange a spot for us to meet, but the signal was awful here, probably because of all the people. Once I finally got through after several attempts, my phone died before we decided where to reconvene.

I figured I'd just keep walking, hoping that might eventually lead me to them. I scanned the crowds and walked at random, ignoring the famous sights, instead searching for the smallest hint of someone I knew. But by the time I got to the Otowa Waterfall, which the map said was pretty far into the grounds, I still hadn't had any luck.

Well, crap.

How the hell was I supposed to find everyone on these huge grounds?

Looking back, I'd turned a blind eye to a ton of red flags. First off, this place was so packed with tourists that it'd make a perfect feeding ground for zombies. Then there was the fact I just let Mashiro impose her ten-meter distance rule, and completely lost sight of her. With the way things had been going since this morning, I also should've predicted that my phone would run out of battery in no time at all. If only I'd asked to borrow one of Ozu's spare phones as soon as I saw how busy it was here.

I couldn't believe this had happened, after I made that promise with Mashiro to enjoy the class trip together.

What the hell was I doing?

I allowed myself three minutes of regret. Any more than that would be nothing more than wasted time. The best thing to do now was to go back to the front entrance, which my group would have to pass through to get home.

I was disappointed I wouldn't get to enjoy the sights properly, but it wasn't worth the risk of getting left behind. I did consider waiting by the Otowa Waterfall; problem was, there was no guarantee the group would come here.

It wasn't like I'd never come back to Kyoto either. There was

nothing stopping me from returning if I felt like it. I could even make it a group trip with the Alliance. That'd be even better, because we wouldn't have to leave Iroha behind just because she was a year younger. Getting lost wasn't a *bad* thing, but an opportunity to come up with an awesome plan for next time! You can put a positive spin on anything, and it never fails to make the future look bright! Ha ha ha! ...Ugh.

Keeping up a brave face sure was hard. I was sighing again before I knew it.

"O-Ooboshi-kun?"

"Huh?" The familiar voice had me looking up.

What was this? An angel come down to rescue me from my despair? Uh, maybe it wasn't a good idea to casually mention angels at a Buddhist shrine. Not that I'd know.

The point is, I was overjoyed to see my savior, clad in our uniform. I probably overreacted.

"Midori-san! Boy, am I glad to see you here. This is nothing short of a miracle!"

"Wh-Wh-Wha— Huh?"

There she was, the honor student at the top of our year and chair of the Class Trip Committee, a seriously serious girl you could cook up by boiling a stock of plain flour to get all the nonsense out, wrapping it up in a bland layer of white bread, and laying it down on an undecorated plate, no sauce, to create a meal that was guaranteed to exceed your daily allowance of not having fun.

I grabbed Midori by the hand and pulled her forward. I'd never been happier to see a familiar face.

"I got separated from my group, you see!"

"Oh... That explains why you're by yourself."

"Yeah. I totally lost sight of them, what with these insane crowds. I was way too careless. I'm even more embarrassed admitting to it in front of someone like you, who'd never in a million years make such a stupid mistake."

"Ngh."

"Huh? Something wrong?"

"Oh, um, no. *I'd* never make a mistake like that in a million years, of course..." Midori said, her eyes darting this way and that like she had something to hide. Those eyes were the very thing that led me to notice that *her* group was nowhere to be seen either.

"Oops, sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"Quiet! I'm the committee *chair*, always doing my best to put on a perfect display of leadership, so please don't draw attention to the fact that I was so pathetically captivated by the beautiful, culturally significant sights here that I ended up getting left behind, all right?!"

“A-All right. Sorry. Sounds like you’ve been having a tough time...”

“Oh, how could I have fallen from grace so utterly! This mistake shall haunt me for the rest of my life!”

“I guess we’re no closer to solving our problems...”

If Midori-san was separated from her group too, there was no hope of me hitching a ride with them.

“If you’re hopelessly lost like I am, I’m guessing your phone’s either run out of battery, or you’ve left it at the hotel?”

“Phone?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s gotta be one of the two, or you’d have gotten in contact with your group to meet up again by now. Look at mine: it’s completely dead.”

“Phoning them... You know, I was so overwhelmed by my confusion that I forgot I could do that!” Midori froze, and twitched once.

“Wh-What’s the matter?”

“Wait. I’m switching all of my three hundred IQ points to full capacity.”

“Right...”

I was inclined not to believe anybody who outright claimed they had an IQ of three hundred.

“You’re alone. *I’m* alone. Say my phone was out of battery, we’d have no choice but to go around these temple grounds together, just the two of us,” Midori murmured to herself at high speed, her eyes terrifyingly lifeless.

“Y-You okay, Midori-san? You look kinda out of it—”

“Ooboshi-kun!”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Unfortunately, my phone has run out of battery. It’s a truly lamentable state of affairs.”

“R-Right, I thought so. Otherwise you’d be with the rest of your group by now.”

“Indeed. Hence why I’m all alone and in a panic! Would such a thing be possible were my phone not to have any charge left? Nay, I say!”

What was with the theatrics?

I frowned at her dubiously, but a part of me was relieved. Being alone in an unfamiliar place was scary. Just having *one* other person in the same position was a load off my mind.

“Splitting up again isn’t gonna be wise. Wanna tag along with me?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose I have no choice! There is simply no way for me to refuse!”

“Let’s go then. The entrance is this way.”

“The entrance? Why there?”

“The entrance is the only place our groups are guaranteed to go, so that’s where we gotta be if we want any hope of meeting up with them again. If we just walk around at random, the risk of missing them entirely is too darn high.”

“N-No! Unthinkable! We *must* take in the sights!”

Midori was being oddly stubborn. She slid right up to me, holding a map of Kyoto and the guide for the class trip in front of her.

“E-Explain,” I said.

“Have you forgotten, Ooboshi-kun? When we get back from the class trip, we are to submit a report on what we learned from our sightseeing! How can we write a report if we skimp on the tourism?!”

“We live in a time where we can literally look up everything we need online, you know.”

“Such sloth! Such frivolity! I am *appalled*!”

“Uh... I guess I can’t argue with you there.”

“A class trip isn’t a vacation! It’s all about experiencing and learning about culture through our own eyes and skin, and becoming *one* with it! This is an opportunity to learn something *for ourselves*, and not just rely on the lesser offerings of encyclopediae, textbooks, or the internet! We *must* take this seriously!”

“All right, all right, I get it. Keep your panties on.”

“As if I’d take them off for *you*!”

“It’s a figure of speech! Chill!” I gave Midori a light karate chop to the head.

“Ow!”

I wouldn’t usually resort to physical violence, but considering the holiness of this place, it’d be even worse to allow the runaway train that was Midori’s dirty mind to travel farther down the tracks of depravity.

Still, she really was straighter-laced than anybody I’d ever known. Here we were, lost, and she still insisted on prioritizing schoolwork.

“You’d rather do some sightseeing then, okay. Do you wanna go together?”

“I suppose... I’m not entirely comfortable being alone with you, seeing as you might do something to me, but since this is somewhat of an emergency, there isn’t really time for such concerns.”

“If you don’t want to, we can just split up here again. It’s no biggie.”

“N-No, we can’t. If we split up, you would just go back to the hotel without looking at anything, wouldn’t you? Well, that’s not happening on my watch! And anyway...” Midori suddenly lowered her voice. She shoved the class trip schedule into my chest, looked up at

me demurely, and mumbled, "If you and Tsukinomori-san aren't really involved, then there's no ethical reason why we shouldn't go around together, is there?"

"I mean, I guess not?"

"Exactly."

I didn't see how pairing up with her because we were lost counted as being unfaithful to my "girlfriend," personally, but Midori took life a lot more seriously than me. Maybe this was just another manifestation of that.

Midori took a hop backwards, her ponytail fluttering as she turned away, before looking back at me and offering me her hand. "Let's go," she lilted.

"Right..."

The excitement of being on the class trip must have been making me see things.

Because right then, Midori's smile looked just as cheerful and carefree as any other girl's, without a hint of strictness to be seen.

Midori and I decided to start with the spot closest to us: the Otowa Waterfall, where we'd bumped into each other. We lined up until our turn finally came, then stepped forward towards the three narrow streams of falling water, ladles in hand. The general idea was this: drinking the water from this waterfall was supposed to grant you the grace of the gods. As for the specifics...

"Isn't each of these streams supposed to bless you in a different area?"

"That's correct. The stream on the right is for longevity. The middle one is for your romantic endeavors. And the one on the left is to help you with your studies." Midori immediately had an explanation ready for me. She really was a genius.

I knew drinking the water was supposed to bless you in some way, but that was about it. There was also some kind of legend about an elixir of gold around these places, but if *my* mind was corrupt enough to picture the wrong thing when describing somebody drinking a golden liquid, I shuddered to think how Midori would react, and what she would think of me. I decided to keep my mouth shut.

"Which one are you going to have, Ooboshi-kun?"

"I guess I'll go for longevity."

I didn't believe that your schoolwork could be improved other than by your own efforts. Same with love. That wasn't something you could expect the gods to help you with either. Sure, you could probably make the same argument for longevity, but you still get those people who smoke and drink like there's no tomorrow living on

for years, while some people who exercise daily and do all the right things end up in an early grave.

Compared to the other two options, this seemed to be the one with the most luck involved.

“What about you, Midori-san?”

“Um, well... I suppose I’ll try the m-middle one...”

“Huh. Not the one that boosts your studies?”

“Very funny. I suppose you think my entire personality is based around studying and schoolwork, don’t you?”

“Of course not.” There were multiple facets to Kageishi Midori’s personality. She was mega quick to jump to conclusions. She was a wooden actress. She had more knowledge about sexual stuff than you’d expect. Midori was far from a two-dimensional character to me. “I just didn’t think you’d pick the romance one,” I explained. “I thought you were one of those people who just aren’t interested. So what, you found someone you like in the advanced class?”

“Ngh... I don’t think it’s any of your business, Ooboshi-kun.”

“Yeah, it’s far from my business. Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

Midori hesitated. “I-I just wouldn’t want you to get the wrong impression and think that there *was* somebody in my class who I was interested in,” she said, her face bright red. I guessed she wasn’t used to talking about love. “Th-There’s a covert meaning behind the blessings of this waterfall too. The stream in the middle isn’t *just* about finding your soul mate; it also has a beneficial effect on your physical appearance. You can’t just assume someone drinking from it is looking to get into a relationship, all right? D-Do you see what I’m saying?”

“I get it. Stop waving that ladle at me.”

Brandishing a holy item like a weapon seemed like a good way to earn the wrath of the gods to me.

Anyway, even if she wasn’t here for a boost to her love life, I wouldn’t have expected Midori to pick beautification over the other options either. It sounded more like a Sasara thing to me. Speaking of, I should probably tell her about this. She’d probably love it.

“Oh, and speaking of covert meaning.” Midori piped up again.

“The ‘studies’ stream isn’t just for students. It’s also linked to success in your career. Doesn’t that interest someone like you more than longevity?”

“That actually sounds pretty good,” I said, though I’d always been planning to lead the Alliance to success without relying on divine intervention. Although, getting a little buff from the gods might not be such a bad idea. “Thanks. I’ll go for that one.”

I stepped towards the miniature waterfall on the left and let its water fill up my ladle. I then let the clear, sparkling water fill my mouth and flow smoothly down my throat. It was just a little sweet,

and neither too warm nor too cold. Water, at any temperature, was my usual drink of choice due to its health benefits. I was confident in my palette's ability to discern the quality of water, and this was some quality liquid indeed.

Only, I didn't want to go too far into describing the mouthfeel, because of course Midori was going to fixate on the fact that I was talking about my tongue, an organ whose primary purpose was to aid in eating and talking, and yet thanks to the internet, it was now branded as this dirty thing whose only use was during sexual activities. It wouldn't be *my* fault that she took it that way, but still.

Actually, thinking about it, I hadn't said anything out loud, and *I* was the one linking it to perverted activities... Sorry, Midori. Maybe I'm just as bad as you.

"Okay, I'm done. Midori-sa—?!" I cut myself off, suddenly realizing I was being rude.

Midori was delicately drinking from her ladle, her eyes closed and a loose strand of hair falling by her ear. With the rest of her hair tied up neatly, she looked just like a shrine maiden in the middle of a sacred ceremony.

And here I was, with my rotten head full of nonsense. I watched the slight movements of the pale skin on her throat as she swallowed down the liquid. Then, she opened her eyes and slid them towards me, catching my gaze while she still held the ladle to her mouth.

Startled, she squeezed her eyes shut again and gulped down the rest of the water. *Now* she was reminding me of the magnificent Sumire. It was, after all, her genetic destiny to become a heavy drinker. The way she was swallowing that water down, I could see her becoming a second Murasaki Shikibu-sensei the very moment the law allowed for it.

Gasping for air as soon as she was done, Midori drew close to me, shoulders heaving. "Th-That was close! I just about managed to drink it without spitting it out everywhere! No thanks to you, Ooboshi-kun! Why were you staring at me like that while I was drinking?!"

"S-Sorry, it was just... You looked so perfect, I couldn't help it."

"What, you were *entranced*?!"

"I guess, in a way, but...it's not what you're thinking! I wasn't thinking of anything dirty."

"I wouldn't mind if you had been..."

"What?"

"N-Nothing! You were stealing glances at me, and that makes you a pervert! A brute!"

"Would you make up your mind already?!" I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder, and I realized we were making people wait. I turned. "Sorry, we—"

“Hey, *anata!*”

“Uh...”

Some guy (he looked American to me) was grinning at us like we’d made his day. Why, I had no idea.

“She is a genuine *tsundere onna*?! That’s totally *kawaii!*”

I could tell from his expression that he was trying to be friendly. If he were Japanese, he’d definitely be from the Kansai region, and speak in a similarly difficult-to-follow dialect. The thing was, he was suddenly speaking to me in a weird mix of English and Japanese, and I had no clue what he was saying. He said “*kawaii*,” right? And “*onna*,” so girl? It was hard to tell through his accent. Either way, if he was here at a tourist spot complimenting a girl he’d never met, there was a chance he was looking for a hook-up.

I took Midori’s hand and dipped my head at the American apologetically. “Sorry! No English!”

“O-Ooboshi-kun? Do you need me to translate?”

“Sorry to hold up the line,” I hurriedly said in Japanese to the people waiting. “Bye!” I dashed away, pulling Midori along behind me.

“*Sayonara! Ganbare* for your eternal love!”

Still not having the faintest clue what the guy was saying as we retreated, I kept running until we made it to the inner sanctuary. When we stopped, I struggled to breathe and steady my heart rate, which was still galloping after I started sprinting out of nowhere.

Midori was in a similar state, a sheen of sweat on her forehead. “Ooboshi-kun,” she said between heaves. “I think you got the wrong idea. I think that man just wanted to be friendly.”

“What, you understood him?” I asked between ragged breaths.

“Yes. I’m proficient in English conversation.”

“If you call that English...” Also, she might have been proficient, but she hadn’t even been the one talking.

“I think he was an anime fan enjoying a vacation to Japan. He thought I was acting like a *tsundere*, and got overly excited because ‘they really exist.’ He also thought we were a couple.”

“A *tsundere*, huh? Yeah, I can see why he thought that.” It was an accurate description of Midori’s behavior back there. The only difference was, unlike the trope, she had been totally serious when she called me a brute. “I hope I didn’t offend him... I genuinely thought he was trying to hit on you.”

“It’s not like you to react so impulsively, Ooboshi-kun. You’re usually so levelheaded.” Midori laughed. I didn’t know how I felt about *her*, the queen of jumping to the wrong conclusion and running with it, laughing at me for the same thing.

“Can you blame me? If he really *had* been sketchy, then even a

second's hesitation could've put you in danger. That wasn't a risk I was willing to take."

"Ooboshi-kun..." Midori murmured my name and stared at her hand—the same one I'd been holding on to a moment ago.

Oh crap. I *had* been holding her hand, hadn't I? Maybe it was a spur of the moment thing, but it was still stupid of me. It was a relief to see she didn't seem mad exactly, but there did seem to be something on her mind.

"Sorry. I probably shouldn't have grabbed your hand like that without asking."

For a moment, Midori didn't respond. "...No. I didn't mind. I'm actually surprised how little it bothered me..."

"O-Oh."

I'd never seen her react like that to anything before. It felt...funny, and I wasn't sure how to interpret it. This was the girl who'd brand you a pervert without a second thought if you so much as brushed against her shoulder.

I needed to bring down the tension in the air before things got too awkward. I sighed, then rearranged my expression into something neutral. Something that said I hadn't noticed anything. Something that said everything was back to normal. "Shall we head for the next spot? This is supposed to be an educational visit, right?"

Midori closed the hand she was staring at and looked up at me. "Okay..." All at once, her face lit up. "Let's go, Ooboshi-kun!"

Strangely enough, that brightness was something else I'd never seen from her.

And so, the strange discomfort in my chest remained.

We went to the Amida Hall from the inner sanctuary, after which we headed for the Jishu-jinja shrine. Why was there a Shinto shrine right by a Buddhist temple? Well, this was one of those examples of Buddhism and Shintoism kind of melding together, something uniquely Japanese. In fact, for a long time before the Meiji period, the title of Japan's only organized religion was held by an amalgamation of the two.

There were also a *ton* of couples around here, drawn by the power of its mysterious, sacred charms. The real draw was of course the love stones. Two stones, bound with rope and facing each other across a ten-meter space. Successfully walking from one to the other with your eyes closed was said to earn you the divine blessing of a happy marriage. Pure hogwash, without a shred of scientific evidence to back it up.

"So cheer up, okay?" I said

“R-Right! There’s no scientific evidence to back it up whatsoever!” Midori said.

“That’s right. Even if you *did* take a ninety-degree turn in the completely wrong direction right at the start, that doesn’t mean you’ll end up in an unhappy marriage.”

“Of course not! I’m still young; there’s no telling how my love life will end up!”

“You know, you sound like someone trying to convince me to watch season two of an anime after I struggled through the mediocre first season, because ‘season two is when it gets good.’”

Besides, didn’t she drink from the “romance stream” before to improve her looks? Why did she suddenly care about her love life now?

Midori stood up and looked around, flustered, before thrusting her finger at a building with a tiled roof. It had a sign offering love fortunes.

“If I pull one of those fortunes, maybe my luck will turn around!”

“Yeah, maybe...”

“Excuse me, ma’am? Could I get one of those fortunes, please?”

The place was crowded with female customers. Midori looked impatient as she waited in line, though of course she didn’t do anything as ill-mannered as trying to cut. The shrine maiden chuckled politely at Midori’s eagerness and passed over a fortune once Midori handed her the money.

Midori returned to me, unfurling the piece of paper with all the grandeur of a green-clad hero pulling a holy sword from a stone. And just like that hero, she was speechless as she stared at the words on the paper, her face pale. I’ll stop with the dumb reference now.

“I-Impossible...” She sank to her knees, the despair all too clear on her face, the fortune slipping through her fingers and fluttering to the ground. I picked it up.

“It’s just a fortune. No need to overreact.”

“This is a perfectly reasonable reaction... I got the worst level of luck! Certain disaster!”

“Even those never say anything worse than ‘be careful not to trip on your way home, and look both ways before you cross the street.’”

“Oh, it’s far from something so trivial.”

“Whatever you say. You sure are a drama queen, Midori-san...” I chuckled a little to myself, unfolding the paper to read the contents.

Terrible Luck. You will not get home alive.

“It’s predicting your death?!” I’d never known a message from the gods to be so merciless.

“Help me, Ooboshi-kun! I’m going to die on this class trip! Despair is going to gnaw away at me from the inside out until I turn to dust

without having achieved anything worthwhile!”

“Calm down! You’re not gonna die! You’re gonna be fine!”

“You’re lying! You saw what was written on my fortune! I’m not getting home alive!”

“These things never come true, though! Just forget about it!”

“Keep your voice down, Ooboshi-kun! You can’t shout such things in front of the shrine’s staff!”

“I’m trying to make you feel better!” I cried. “Forgive me, holy people!”

Luckily, the maidens at the stall were smiling, and their strong Kyoto dialects remarked what a cute couple we were. They didn’t seem mad at all.

Wait. Unless slipping into their dialect was a passive-aggressive way of showing that they *were* mad?

Nah, I was just being prejudiced...

Now that we’d been to the waterfall, the Jishu-jinja, and the love stones, I realized something. The tourists’ reactions here were sort of over-the-top. There were cheers and tears at the fortune stalls, and wild chattering by the love stones. I again found myself surprised at how many people in this world cared so much about romance.

There were several people who had come as couples, and they were the ones sitting around the quieter areas hunting monsters on their Tenchido Buttons, the company’s famous console.

It struck me that I was right about a gut feeling I’d always had.

Video games weren’t just for nerds—lots of “normal” people played them too, but you would only reach that demographic if your game became a smash hit. I always thought as much, but this was the first time I had the opportunity to see hard evidence with my own eyes. In order to better my awareness, I needed to cultivate my idea of what normal was. I needed to experience it for myself.

“This is it, Ooboshi-kun. The center of Kiyomizu-dera. The stage, they call it, the one from the idiom—”

“Yeah. The main temple building.” The wooden structure loomed before us, several times more impressive than any of the other various buildings we’d seen today. “We never found anyone in the end.”

“No... I wonder if we passed anybody without noticing?” Midori said, laughing nervously.

“Eh, maybe we did. Personally, I had fun just seeing everything with you.”

“Y-You did?! Why?”

“You shared trivia with me that you can’t find online, and told me about the historical background to some of these places. I genuinely learned a lot.” I started to feel embarrassed that I used to think she

was a pervert, since her tirades usually strayed into sexual territory.

Today, she'd shown me that she was capable of speaking at length about more normal stuff too. She was just knowledgeable about *everything*. The fact that it was the sexual knowledge that came out more often wasn't her fault; it was the fault of the situations she found herself in naturally lending themselves to those topics.

I wondered if Kageishi Midori was a girl very much like a mirror. No, actually, weren't most humans like that? Take me, for example. What if the reason there were so many people around me who seemed to have it in for me was that *I* was the annoying one in the first place?

Aaand now I was worried I was annoying without realizing it. Great.

"You're strange, Ooboshi-kun."

"Please, that's the last thing I wanna hear when I'm scared I might be annoying."

"Sorry, strange was the wrong word. I mean different. You know, when I share my knowledge with people, the majority of them don't really listen. Yet you appeared to be hanging on to my every word."

"Aren't most people interested in learning new things?" I asked, staring at her blankly. I hadn't listened to her because I was trying to kiss her ass or anything. I thought it was normal to enjoy picking up new knowledge.

Midori's face lit up. "You know, I think you're right!" She leaned forward, her voice bright. "When there's something I don't know or a question is bugging me, it just doesn't feel right *not* to look up the answer!"

"For sure. And you know what annoys me is when I'm searching something online but all I get is a ton of useless clickbait articles."

"I completely agree. I always keep on searching until I find something that's good quality. Although that's becoming more and more difficult these days, so often I don't bother and buy a book written by an expert instead."

"I get you. I wish they'd pick up the pace and make more of those technical books available as ebooks. Then I swear I'd be looking up stuff in those all the time."

"Yes, exactly! It's also fun to search for articles and papers by foreign authors. I could read the results of an enthusiast's scientific research for hours and not notice the time go by!"

"You read foreign articles?! I feel like I wouldn't have the time for that..."

"I know it's a waste of time, but I just get so curious that I can't help it. There's so much useless information out there. I wouldn't recommend it for somebody as busy as you."

"Hey, if it's interesting enough, I wanna know. Y'know, the most

efficient option is probably just to have you tell me all the good parts.”

“Really? You’re treating me as an aggregator site now?”

“Sorry, am I making it sound like I think I’m better than you?” I laughed.

“As a matter of fact, you are.” Midori huffed, putting her hands on her hips like a stereotypical committee chair. It suited her. “I suggest you take the time to think about how your words affect others in the future.” Then she averted her gaze and muttered, “But I don’t mind, once in a while, sharing my findings with you...”

“Thanks. That’d be good.”

No longer able to stay angry, Midori laughed and nodded cheerfully in agreement. It was a genuine smile, the kind of smile I’d seen on Takamiya and Maihama when they were excited to see the sights, or Sasara when she was eating dessert. It was weird that such a dull topic inspired such glee in her, but then again, she *was* an honor student.

Seeing this side of her was kind of nice; up until now, I had only ever spoken to her when I needed something, or before that, when I was helping the drama club. It was only now that we were speaking freely and without a particular objective that I realized how easily the conversation was flowing. I would’ve never picked up on that fact if I’d been keeping my mind solely focused on work.

As we spoke about nothing in particular, Midori and I stepped onto the wooden floor and walked to the end of the terrace, which stuck out over the cliff face. We wove our way through the bustling sea of people until we made it to the railing.

“Wow! Look, Ooboshi-kun! Isn’t it incredible?”

“Yeah... Now *that’s* a great view.”

“It’s around thirteen meters to the bottom. It would be impossible to jump it, despite the idiom.”

“To jump off the stage at Kiyomizu, right? To take the plunge... I guess it wouldn’t have become an idiom if it was something just anyone could do.”

It was exactly *because* it was an obviously impossible jump that the idiom spread.

There was Mt. Otowa, visible from the stage. There was foliage in various shades of red, stretching out like velvet. Across from us was central Kyoto. Dedicating this fantastic spot to the goddess Kannon had to be the ultimate act of reverence. There was just one thing bringing the mood down.

“I wish I could take a photo,” I murmured.

“Huh?” Midori was quick to react to my words, turning to me and blinking.

“It’s a gorgeous view. It’d be nice if I could get a photo to show people when I tell them all about it.”

I wanted to share my memories of the class trip with the rest of the Alliance: Iroha and Makigai Namako-sensei. Though I guess that was just me wanting to show off. Either way, sharing this astounding view with them was a form of communication. Whatever complex motives I might have, that was how I felt at the most basic level.

“You can’t just take one?” Midori asked. “I won’t tease you about being obsessed with Pinsta or anything like that, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not. My phone’s dead.”

“Oh.”

I hadn’t foreseen the risk of my battery running out, so of course I hadn’t brought a camera with me just in case.

I froze and turned to look at Midori, suddenly realizing what I was saying. I wasn’t the only one whose phone had died. She was in the same boat. I hadn’t meant to reply to her so curtly either, and though I hoped she hadn’t taken it the wrong way, unfortunately it looked like she had. Midori had fallen silent; her brow was furrowed and she was biting her lip.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring down the mood.”

“No, I’m the one who ought to apologize...” Midori shook her head, her ponytail swinging with its movements. For a while she stayed quiet like she was mulling something over, until suddenly she looked up to meet my gaze determinedly. “Ooboshi-kun!”

“Hm? Gah!”

A breeze swept over the terrace. The trees whispered in its wake, their leaves rustling against each other in a ripple of red.

“That was some wind.” I’d squinted my eyes against it, and now I opened them. “You okay, Midori-sa—” What I saw made me freeze.

Though the wind had been enough to whip up her hair, Midori herself seemed unperturbed. She was looking right at me and offering me her phone. It had its camera app open.

“Huh?”

“You can take your photo with this. I’ll send it to you over LIME.”

“Thanks, but...I thought...”

Hadn’t she said her phone was out of juice too? Before I could finish, Midori had grabbed my hand and forced her phone into it.

“I’m sorry! I lied to you. Look, my phone’s fine. It’s on ninety percent!”

She was an honor student all right. No teenager’s phone would be at a whole ninety percent unless they only used it when absolutely necessary.

“Oh, okay. But why did you say it was dead then?”

“O-Ooboshi-kun... You’ve told me all sorts of lies, haven’t you?”
Midori asked, instead of answering my question.

“Huh?”

“You’re not dating Tsukinomori-san, you were never engaged to my sister, and you’re not a Hollywood director either. Right?”

“Yeah, I told you all of that yesterday. But I don’t get how that’s related to—”

“That means I can throw my hat in the ring, doesn’t it?”

It clicked. I gasped.



I knew what she was trying to say. The feelings she was trying to communicate.

“I wanted to spend some time with you. Just the two of us!”

With that, she proved me right.

“I wasn’t planning on saying anything at the start. But when I saw how disappointed you were, I couldn’t stand it! The remorse was too much. If I hadn’t lied to you, I could have just lent you my phone, and you’d have a lovely memory to take back with you. But I did lie, and now I can’t bring myself to just keep quiet and watch. Please, use my phone!”

“O-Okay...” I accepted the phone she’d forced into my hand and, still confused, turned it towards the view from the terrace and pressed the shutter button. Somehow, the view that had blown me away a few moments earlier looked just a little lifeless now. And that was because there was something—someone—who’d made an even bigger impact on me. If there was anybody here who fit the idiom—to jump from the stage at Kiyomizu-dera, to do something *bold*—it was her.

“Did you get a nice photo?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Midori-san.” Dazed, I passed her back the phone. My hand brushed against her as I did so, and I jumped, ready to receive a scolding. But there was no cry of “sexual harassment” from her.

“Good.” She paused in thought. “Yes, I really don’t mind it. Letting you use my things. Touching you.”

“Right. Um, Midori-san... I dunno if this is going to sound a little insensitive, but am I right in thinking you like—”

“Time’s up.”

“Huh?”

“That’s your group over there, isn’t it? Unfortunately, they’ve found you,” Midori said, glancing behind us. I followed her gaze to find Takamiya waving enthusiastically in our direction as she pulled Mashiro along with her other hand. Ozu, Suzuki, and Maihama were following them. “Come to the hotel’s observation terrace just before lights out tonight. I’d like to tell you the rest there.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you. I’m going to go and reconvene with my own group.” Midori waved her charged phone at me before turning to leave—only to stop in her tracks. “I’ve been far worse behaved on this class trip than I would ever have imagined, and it’s all your fault. Thank you.” With that, she ran off.

I could do nothing but watch her go as she disappeared from view, her ponytail swishing behind her.

When we were done at Kiyomizu-dera, we bundled into a taxi to head for our next destination. Even as I watched the cityscape pass by, my mind was more preoccupied with the face of the girl who'd told me such a baffling lie. There was little doubt in my mind that, if we hadn't been interrupted by my group, she would have confessed to me; I was pretty sure I wasn't just overthinking things.

I mean, she could have made contact with her group any time she wanted, but instead she told me her phone was dead as an excuse to explore the temple with me. Assuming Midori's goal was to spend time with me and ask me out, it was an efficient and logical strategy. I could kind of see myself doing something similar, though I wasn't exactly sure of that.

I compared it to Mashiro's confession—hers came out of nowhere over LIME, so I had no time to mentally prepare myself for it. Meanwhile, if Midori was going to confess to me, it would likely be tonight, where she'd told me to meet her. I wanted to be prepared for it, and I wanted to know how I'd respond beforehand.

"Y'know, I never thought Kageishi-san of all people'd manage to seduce you, Aki."

"She hasn't done anything yet. Like I said, we were both lost, so we decided to go 'round Kiyomizu together."

"Even if Tsukinomori-san bought your story, *I'm* not so easy to fool."

"Yeah, I know." I glanced at the reflection in the rearview mirror. Suzuki was asleep in the passenger seat. It would have been way easier if he'd made it known he was knocked out by snoring, like he had in the hotel. Then I wouldn't have to bother checking like this. "I think she might be planning to confess to me tonight."

Ozu whistled. "You really are drowning in more girls than a rom-com protagonist. Unless you wanna tell me why I'm wrong for the millionth time?"

"I don't feel like trying to deny it anymore. Though at least a rom-com protagonist generally has some experience with this kinda thing."

"So what are you gonna tell her when she confesses?"

"Good question." I sighed and cast my thoughts back to the day's events.

Towards the end, when I thought Midori might confess there and then, my heart was really pounding. If that sensation meant I was in love with her, then there was no doubt that I was. The problem was, I'd felt the same way with Iroha and Mashiro before; with Sumire and Otoi-san too, for that matter. A racing heartbeat wasn't enough evidence to come to any conclusion on how I felt.

I remembered the swathes of loved-up tourist couples had come to get their romantic fortunes at the temple. How had *they* managed to figure out their feelings and end up in a relationship? I couldn't even begin to guess. Unfortunately, that wasn't good enough; I needed to have something concrete by tonight.

"Which of these girls do I have feelings for?"

"Congratulations. You've changed class to total trash."

"I know, right? I *know* I'm trash..."

Ozu paused. "You might as well just date all of them at this point, y'know."

"Sure, maybe if this was a visual novel with a harem end, but it's not."

Polygamy was banned by Japanese law. So that ruled that out. A regular guy like me didn't have the skills to keep more than one girl happy either. It was important to know your limitations in all things. I adhered closely to the idea of knowing both your place in the world *and* what you're capable of.

There was still time until the evening. I'd spend that time working my brain to exhaustion, getting as much juice out of it as I possibly could. Then I'd face Midori head-on. I had zero experience with this kind of thing, and there was a high chance of me mishandling any romance-related situation I found myself in.

So thinking hard was all I could do.

"By the way, I heard Tsukinomori-san's been acting strange ever since we got back from Kiyomizu-dera."

"Oh yeah..."

"I'm guessing she saw you and Kageishi-san getting cozy with each other."

"Probably..."

"But she's not on your case about it or anything. She's treating you completely normally. There's gotta be something to it, right? Aren't you scared?"

"No, I don't think she..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Hey, say something. Now I'm getting scared."

"Good luck, young Aki."



MaDori (2)



...



Mashiro

Do you know who built Kiyomizu-dera?



Kageishi Midori

Sakanoue no Tamuramaro.



Mashiro

Correct.



Mashiro

And what kind of person was Sakanoue no Tamuramaro?



Kageishi Midori

A martial artist and strategist, who led the conquest of the Emishi.



Kageishi Midori

He was also believed to be the reincarnation of Bishamonten.



Mashiro

Clever as always. You answered right away.



Mashiro

Bishamonten... He's the god of war, right?



Mashiro

I have no choice.



Mashiro

Not after what I saw at Kiyomizu-dera.



Mashiro

The domain of Sakanoue no Tamuramaro; Bishamonten.



Mashiro

He's a god, and he practically told me to fight right then.



Kageishi Midori

I understand how you feel, Tsukinomori-san.



Kageishi Midori

But knowing what I know now, I can no longer back down.



Mashiro

I think it's time you and I had a little talk.



Kageishi Midori

Okay. I'm not going to run from that.



Kageishi Midori

Name the time and place.



Mashiro

After dinner, before bathtime. I'll wait in the hotel's ping-pong area.



Kageishi Midori

Understood.



Kageishi Midori

I'm sorry, Tsukinomori-san.



Kageishi Midori

And that's the last time I'm going to apologize.



Mashiro

...



Mashiro

K.

Interlude: Mashiro and Midori

This hotel was won for the students through Sumire-sensei's blood, sweat, and tears. I didn't know if it ran based on the principle that man couldn't live on bread alone, but it sure felt like it. On top of the delicious meals and onsen, there were lots of recreational facilities here too. For example, there was an area with some ping-pong tables.

After dinner, I put on my armor—only in this case it was a yukata—and took up my position in front of one of the tables. I held a bat in my hand instead of a katana. There were still five minutes before the enemy, Midori-san, was due to arrive, but she showed up early to this room of reckoning. With her yukata sleeves rolled up and her ponytail swishing behind her, the sweet and graceful warrior maiden made her way towards me.

Then there was the rhythmic sound of a ping-pong ball hitting the bat's rubber surface. Midori-san was skillfully manipulating the ball with her bat as she took up her position opposite me, marking her clearly as my opponent.

"You did well to come and meet me," I said.

"Of course I came. There are things I'd like to discuss with you as well."

"You know how I feel, don't you?"

I had opened up my heart to Midori-san in the baths last night when she confronted me with the knowledge that my relationship with Aki was fake. I told her straight. Our relationship might have been a lie, but my feelings for Aki weren't.

"But then at the temple today, you did all this datey stuff with him, when you *know* that I like him."

"I didn't know anything."

"What?"

"I didn't understand myself. I didn't know how I felt about Ooboshi-kun; I've never been in love before. I didn't know what was 'right,' what I was supposed to do. It had been years since I was presented with a problem I couldn't solve."

"Past tense?"

"When I happened on Ooboshi-kun at Kiyomizu-dera and discovered he'd been separated from his group too, I saw it as a chance. A chance to spend a few hours with him and to work out what my feelings truly were. The answer came to me much more quickly

and easily than I had expected.” She hit the ping-pong ball higher into the air. “I was happy. Nervous, surprised, entertained. All sorts of feelings, leading me to the realization that I really do like him. Happiness, though—that was the predominant emotion among them, and the one I found most convincing. It hit me then.”

Midori-san caught the orange ping-pong ball firmly in her hand. Lowering her stance, she got into position to serve the ball.

It was on.

I dropped my hips and sharpened my focus. I wasn’t good at sports, but that didn’t mean I was about to back down.

“I know how you feel, Tsukinomori-san. But the fact remains that you aren’t actually in a relationship with Ooboshi-kun.” The ball flew into the air again. Midori-san wasn’t just playing with it this time. She was ready to serve properly this time. “It’s up to Ooboshi-kun to make a decision. What anybody else wants is irrelevant.” Midori-san released the ball, which shot along the table, following a neat path. She’d put her heart and soul into that serve, and I was surprised by its power. It still wasn’t enough to break down my defenses.

“Aki won’t choose you... Actually, no one’s choosing anything here!” I snapped the ball back at her.

I’d never really played ping-pong before, but I was a master at winning an argument when given the chance. I was a professional author after all, even if I was only a teenager. Not even Midori-san would be a match for me when it came to words. As for my ping-pong technique...I figured I could get by just by hitting the ball as hard as possible.

“If Aki wanted a girlfriend, he’d have had one for ages by now. You met him, what, six months ago? And you think you *know* him? There’s no way you can win against me. I’ve known him most of his life.”

“There is no correlation between how long two people have known each other and the likelihood of them forming a romantic relationship. While it’s true that the more encounters you have, the closer you are likely to get, studies have shown that if you miss the window in which to bring your feelings to the next level, you may end up forever labeled as ‘just a friend’ in the other person’s mind. As Ooboshi-kun’s childhood friend, it’s quite possible that you have spent so much time together that your relationship will remain forever platonic.”

I gasped. A gap in our rally gave her an opportunity to drop a massive bombshell.

“I’m an exception,” I said. “I didn’t see him for three years during junior high school, and we only reunited this spring.”

“Which was more or less the point at which I met him. I won’t

deny that you've spent more time with him and have had more communication with him, but I'm still fully capable of taking part in this fight."

"What?" Her comeback was so snappy, it made me wince. I only just managed to hit the ball back to her, and it wobbled through the air, giving her ample opportunity to go for a point.

Midori-san grinned, and I knew then that she'd planned this. Not only did she get me heated up by bringing the argument this far in the first place, she'd purposely set a trap by giving me a point that was easy for me to retort to. She wasn't just making her case. She was working perfectly to mislead me, breaking down my argument and backing me against the wall.

This was how a true honor student debated. And it was tougher than I could ever have imagined.

"Aki's chasing his dream! He made a vow to himself to shun romance so that he can make it a reality. He's made a contract—an official contract with an adult—for his dream too. So even if you confess to him, it's not gonna go anywhere. He can't have a girlfriend!" I burst out in a single breath before the ping-pong ball, which was practically skimming the ceiling, came falling back down. My point hadn't come from a place of logic, but emotion. I wasn't sure *why* I was getting so emotional either. Was I mad? Mad at what she was getting at? What *was* she getting at?

"I'm afraid I can't accept that. It makes little sense." Midori-san's steely gaze watched the ball as it descended. She rearranged her grip on the bat. "That contract isn't even based in law, and yet it's powerful enough to take away his right to romantic freedom? I shudder to think what sort of adult would impose such a reckless 'contract' upon a child."

Smash!

The ball came zooming towards my side of the table. Normally, I'd have no hope of hitting it back from this distance. But I stretched out my arm and jumped for all I was worth, just about managing to return the hit. I still didn't know why I was so riled up over a game of ping-pong. It just felt like I needed to fight for everything I was worth.

"That's completely selfish!" Her argument was fair, yet irrational. I was more familiar with Aki's passion for the Alliance than anybody else, and this girl was really getting on my nerves now. She showed up in his life out of nowhere and acted like she knew everything about the situation. "You're really gonna put your own feelings first without considering what Aki wants? If you really love him, then shouldn't you be thinking about his feelings in all of this?"



I was still speaking well. This argument was far from over. But I overstretched with that last hit of the ball, and again it flipped unsteadily into the air.

“Then consider this,” Midori-san said. “What if he likes me too?”

“Huh?”

“Is Ooboshi-kun really going to be happy suppressing his feelings for the sake of his dream?”

“He...”

“Because I don’t think so!”

Midori-san delivered her next smash with everything she had, physically and mentally. It was the most powerful hit she’d made yet.

The orange bullet whooshed right past my face and hit the wall behind me, bouncing off it with a *thud*. And then it rolled to the floor with a series of *clacks*.

Midori-san twirled her bat in her hand and pointed the end squarely in my direction.

“Give me this person’s details. This ‘adult’ who’s placing Ooboshi-kun under these illegal constraints.”

“What?”

“I will speak to them directly. Set Ooboshi-kun free. All I need to do is negotiate, allowing Ooboshi-kun to strive for both his dream and romance at the same time. Or do you disagree?”

I gritted my teeth. It was over. Midori-san had struck right at the very core of this entire situation. This. This was what she’d been getting at. This was what I hadn’t wanted her to bring out into the open. I thought I’d been giving this match my all, but when it came to the salient point, I had nothing. I was weak.

“What’s the matter, Midori-san? It’s not like you to push for your own selfishness at the expense of defying rules that have been put into place...”

“I don’t know what kind of girl you think I am, Tsukinomori-san, but I would never hold myself back for the sake of following the rules.”

I realized it then. I thought Midori-san was an ultra-serious person, a punctual person, who never broke a single rule and always did exactly what any adult told her to do. But there was a glaring hole in that assumption. One I should have picked up on the moment I found out she led the drama club.

Midori-san had been raised in a family of strict teachers, strict enough that even Sumire-sensei had to keep her work as an illustrator hidden from them. So how did she get away with spending so much time on something that wasn’t study-related? It would be different if her chosen club was something that could get her into a better

university, but the drama club had been on the verge of collapse and, before the Alliance stepped in, its members lacked so much skill that even the most serious of plays turned into pantomimes. There was no way a family like hers would allow her to take part in something so frivolous.

I had misunderstood Midori Kageishi-san, master honor student.

She was a warrior. A girl who was pulling off the impossible feat of getting perfect marks in every single subject just so the adults around her couldn't complain when she indulged in her hobbies.

"My policy is this: to pursue the best outcomes I can while respecting the rules."

This powerful honor student had put her mind to fulfilling her love, and was now a surprisingly overwhelming force. She'd shown me how naive I was and had utterly beaten me. And now she turned her back on me and walked away.

In my mind's eye, I could see the silhouette of somebody else over her retreating figure.

"Why?"

It was a sight that shocked me. It filled me with despair.

Midori-san was just like Aki.

They held the same power, the same perfect conviction in pursuing their goals and sticking fast to their determination no matter what. While adapting to society's conventions, they charged down the narrow path between what was orthodox and what wasn't at full speed, in a way that was both logical and coercive.

What would happen if Midori-san went all out in her pursuit of Aki?

He wouldn't choose me, and he wouldn't choose Iroha-chan. He would pick her, easily. That was what I genuinely believed in that moment.

"What now?" My voice quivered with anxiety, leaving my murmur to rise up like smoke in the empty room and vanish into thin air.

Chapter 8: My Friend's Little Sister Confesses to Me

When I slid open the glass door and stepped out onto the observation terrace, my body, still damp from the bath, was met with a chilly breeze. This wasn't quite the hotel roof, but it was the highest you could go via the elevator. We didn't have the million-dollar view (as an older man like Tsukinomori-san would probably call it) either, so the slightly-too-strong fall wind was going to be the most exciting thing around

The barrier to prevent people from falling was made of transparent material to give a view of the city at night. We also had ornamental plants, deck chairs, a telescope, and a footbath. Nothing was lacking, as though this were put together by an honor student.

There were still ten minutes before the time we'd agreed to meet over LIME. I wagered that if I'd arrived five minutes earlier, she'd already be here, but apparently my decision to go for ten minutes wasn't good enough either.

As I'd expected—actually, she'd beaten my expectations this time around—Midori really was the perfect honor student.

"You're early. How long have you been here?" I asked.

"For about ten minutes."

"So you came twenty minutes early. Impressive."

Midori giggled. "You shouldn't underestimate me." She patted the seat next to her. "Come and take a seat if you'd like."

She was sitting in front of the footbath area. The sandals she'd borrowed from the hotel were placed together neatly next to her chair, while her bare feet were dipped into the hot water.

This all looks kinda familiar...

When I looked at Midori, I suddenly saw a dark silhouette in the exact same position, like a character I had yet to unlock—and then I remembered.

It was the same as when I had spoken with Sumire back at the Kageishi Village inn. The only difference was that back then the water had doctorfish in it.

"Does the Kageishi family have a genetic disposition towards enjoying footbaths?" I asked.

"I'm not sure about my family, but I'm rather neutral about them. I just thought it seemed interesting, so I decided to give it a try."

So it was her curiosity at play.

“The only other member of my family you really know is Sumire. Does she like footbaths, then?”

“She looked like she was enjoying it when I saw her have one.”

Midori laughed. “So I’m reminding you of her, am I? You know, that makes me kind of happy.” Bashful, Midori splashed her feet a little in the water, making a series of tiny waves. “Are you friends with my sister, Ooboshi-kun?”

“I...” I paused. “I guess so. I haven’t really thought about it before.”

“You spend time with her, don’t you? There are certain things you do together, aren’t there?”

“Well...yeah. I can’t really go into specifics, but I swear it’s nothing sketchy. Hopefully you’ll believe that much.”

“Your relationship does seem to fit the definition of friendship if nothing else. That suits me just fine.”

“It ‘suits’ you?”

“If you and my sister are friends, that makes me your friend’s little sister, doesn’t it?”

“I guess.” It was a concept I’d mulled over many times, but it was a little strange to hear Midori reference it. “Hold on a sec. I don’t get it. Why is that a big deal?”

“It means that both of us have a significant relationship with my sister, and I think that’s helpful. Say we dated and ran into any hurdles. Any advice we’d seek from her would be balanced, as she wouldn’t be too heavily biased in either of our favors. In terms of marriage, it helps if the partner is somebody well-known to the family, or at the very least, to one member of that family. It lowers the risk for drama between relatives.”

“You’re thinking about marriage already?!”

“It also means that I will still have a connection to you, even if you outright reject me.”

I swallowed. She was speaking as casually as if she were offering me random bits of trivia.

Midori had now labeled herself that odd, in-between concept: my friend’s little sister. But she wasn’t exactly wrong. No matter the details of the relationship between *us*, as long as her older sibling remained my friend, she would remain my friend’s little sister. *That* was why it “suited” her, as she put it.

As for me, I was worried about misjudging and messing up the distance between us, precisely because it was a relationship we couldn’t cut off. I wished I could be like Midori and just focus on the positives of such an arrangement, but I couldn’t. I was too much of a pessimist at heart.

“You’re not going to sit next to me?” Midori said.

“I don’t feel like a footbath.”

“Oh.” Still making small splashes with her feet, Midori stared at her fuzzy reflection in the water’s surface. “You’re intelligent, Ooboshi-kun. I expect you already know what my intention is here.”

“Yeah.”

Midori didn’t say anything, instead curling the hands on her lap up into fists. Her face was too downcast for me to make out her expression, but through the gaps in her hair, I caught glimpses of her red ears.

Then, without warning, she raised her head. Pulling her feet out of the water, she picked up the towel on the floor and dried them, then stood up straight as though preparing for an important speech.

“Ooboshi-kun! I’m about to solve the most difficult problem I’ve faced in all my life.”

“Huh?” My voice cracked. This wasn’t really— No, this was *far* from what I’d been expecting.

Midori took the stance of a true intellectual, and then began to speak. “We shall call my emotions ‘M,’ and the emotions generally referred to as love ‘L.’”

“Okay...”

“The sum total of L is: ‘seeing their face makes your heart pound,’ ‘just being close to them puts butterflies in your stomach,’ ‘being touched by them makes you break out in a sweat,’ plus ‘being with them is fun,’ ‘you want to know more about them,’ and, more than anything: ‘they are practically all you think about, and your mind wanders to thoughts of them without even realizing it.’”

“R-Right...”

“As for M, if we subtract the instances where I’m directly communicating with you, it fulfills the following: the pounding heart, the butterflies, the sweat, the fun, the desire to know more, *and* the tendency to think of you. Therefore we can conclude that M equals L. If we follow that to its mathematical conclusion...” Midori opened her eyes wide, and I felt a shock wave shoot up my spine.

“I am very much in love with you. QED!”

She said it.

I’d been expecting the confession itself. The lead-up to it, less so; it was based on her honor student brand of logic. Even when she was mustering up her courage and going all out, Midori was still Midori.

She’d squeezed her eyes shut now, as if scared. Her shoulders were trembling. She opened her eyes just a crack, and her voice quivered as she asked, “Let me hear your proof, Ooboshi-kun.”

I knew the question was coming.

No matter how grand I tried to make this, it was a waste of time.

My answer had to be quick, efficient, logical, and plain as day.
But I couldn't do it.



It wasn't that I *wouldn't* answer her. I *couldn't*. Even now, after she'd confessed to me, I didn't have a clear response for her. It just didn't exist within my head.

"Before I respond, I want to ask you something. You're smart, so I'm sure you'll know the answer."

"All right. I'm pretty much naked before you now. I'm not afraid of any questions you might have."

"Tell me what love is."

"What?"

"I don't know if these feelings I have are love or not. I don't know anything. Who do I have feelings for? Do I even *have* feelings for *anyone*? I'm just not sure. I've meddled in so many people's business and interfered in their lives. Is it love that drives me to help them, or something else? Involving myself with so many people, setting my life to overdrive... It's stopped me from understanding my own feelings."

Whenever they were in trouble, I'd made every effort to solve their problems. Ozu, Iroha, Otoi-san, Sumire, Mashiro, Midori, Sasara... I'd always just felt like it was the natural thing to do, and I'd never stopped to consider the nature of the emotions that led me to help these people.

But supposing there were feelings of romantic attraction hidden somewhere within all of that, I had the sense it was important that I identify them and where they were. Despite my contract with Tsukinomori-san, I felt like just being snapped out of my ignorance would allow me to see the world in a different light.

"All right, Ooboshi-kun. I will tell you who you love." Midori put her feet into the sandals, and after making sure she was wearing them properly, approached me.

She put her hand to my cheek. It was so warm that you wouldn't think we were standing outside in the cold breeze. Her body temperature must have been running high. As well as its warmth, her hand had a softness to it, and it felt pleasant against my skin.

But...

"Do you feel bad?"

"What?"

"I confessed my feelings to you. Now I'm touching your cheek. Do you feel guilty? Does it feel like you're doing something wrong?"

That was *exactly* what it felt like. Midori had seen right through me.

"Is there somebody you're thinking of who you really don't want to witness me touching you like this? That's the person you have feelings for. The person on your mind at this very moment. That's who you like."

“Oh... So that’s who it’s been all this time...”

The person I didn’t want to witness this. Those words brought a single face to mind. Just like Midori promised. And now that she’d pointed it out to me, I didn’t feel like denying it or making excuses anymore. I just felt oddly calm. As though the answer had been there all along.

“From your reaction, it would appear that person isn’t me.”

I didn’t reply right away.

“I’m sorry.”

This wasn’t my first time rejecting a confession, but that didn’t make it any easier. An unpleasant, bitter taste spread across my tongue, and I could feel every one of my cells dissolving away like they were cursed.

Who the hell did I think I was?

Midori may have been overly serious and a little aloof, but anybody could see how gorgeous she was. She was an honor student with a bright future ahead of her, and she was highly unlikely to stray from the straight and narrow. She wasn’t just perfect girlfriend material; she was perfect wife material.

Now take her and compare her to me, perfectly middle-of-the-road in both looks and ability. I should have been throwing myself down at her feet, grateful that she would even spare me the time of day! Instead, I rejected her. Like I was *better* than her, when that couldn’t be farther from the truth.

What was that about “knowing your place in the world”? I was ignoring my own advice.

But no matter how much I beat myself up, it wouldn’t change a thing. Now that I knew who I had feelings for, I couldn’t accept Midori’s confession.

Midori was quiet for a while, before suddenly stretching her arms up high above her head. “Guess I got rejected.” She looked exceedingly calm about the whole thing.

“I really am sorry, Midori-san.”

“Don’t be, Ooboshi-kun. I’m your friend’s little sister, remember? You may have rejected me, but it’s going to be difficult to cut ties with me completely, unfair as it is. You have nothing to apologize for. I expected this too, to a certain extent, from that fortune I pulled. I have terrible luck, don’t forget.”

“Yeah, I remember...”

“I should never have doubted the gods! They just showed me that my fortune was completely correct.” Midori laughed, clearly putting in a lot of effort to appear cheerful.

If I hadn’t been feeling guilty before, I really was now.

“Don’t make that face. I’d rather you not get caught up in any

kind of guilt, since it might lead you to start avoiding me. And that would hurt much more.”

“Right. You want our relationship to stay the same.”

“I want to continue being your friend’s little sister. If I might add a selfish request on top of that, I’d like us to be friends who can converse about trivia together. If nothing else, I would like us to remain on good terms.”

“Me too. As long as you don’t mind.”

“I don’t! Now, it’s getting close to lights-out. I ought to return to my room,” Midori said, sounding very much like her serious honor student self. She spun around.

It was strange. From when she confessed to me up until a moment ago, she seemed like a beautiful princess from a faraway kingdom in a fabulous dress. But now she looked just like plain-old Kageishi Midori, as though the clock had struck midnight and the magic had worn off.

“Don’t think I’m going to let you off lightly if I catch you breaking any rules! Off to bed with you!” she called.

“Yeah. I’ll head back in a sec.” After watching Midori disappear inside, I looked up towards the sky.

The moon looked frustratingly big and beautiful, floating up there in the night sky. It would have made for a wonderfully romantic view for any couple to gaze at while basking in each other’s love, if a bit cliché. I genuinely felt bad for wasting it. The least I could do now was admire it for a few more minutes, just to buy me a little time.

As she hadn’t wanted to make me feel bad, Midori had pretended she was totally fine when she headed back to her room. I didn’t want her efforts to go to waste, so I gave her some extra time to return by herself.

I’m sorry, Midori. I am.

She’d gotten so much better compared to when I first saw her. If only I wasn’t so used to being around such incredible talent, I might not have noticed. But I *had* seen them:

The cracks in her acting.

“You don’t like upsetting people, huh?”

“Of course not.”

“Picking somebody is gonna upset the others. You’ve finally worked out how you feel now, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Then you gotta prepare yourself. You’re gonna have to hurt somebody else. It might not even be just one person.”

“I get that.”

“As long as you do.”

Interlude: Midori

My phone shook in my hand. A lighthearted conversation was unfolding on its bright screen.

Shadow Drama Club Member A: Class trip: tempted monks, seeing things apocalyptic, painless uroboros.

YAMADA: Uhh, sleeping in bunks, little kids idiotic, no school? Kudos.

Kageishi Midori: Whatever I expected to see on LIME, it wasn't this. What is going on here?

YAMADA: Midori-san! Hiya!

Background NPC: We were bored after lights-out, so we were having a rhyming battle.

Kageishi Midori: Class trip or not, I see you people never change...

Shadow Drama Club Member A: Forever unchanging. Perpetually the same.

Background NPC: We didn't wanna spam the LIME chat we've got with Kohinata-san either so we're doing it here.

Background NPC: Feels like ages since we last used this chat.

Kageishi Midori: Yes, it has been a while.

YAMADA: I was bored and started scrolling up. The nostalgia's unreal lol.

Shadow Drama Club Member A: Drama club's formation. Cringe.

Kageishi Midori: Let me take a look...

I scrolled upwards through the chat in search of the messages they were referring to. There were serious conversations concerning the drama club's activities, as well as general lighthearted chatter between its members, at a rough ratio of 3:7 in favor of the chatter.

I'd been a part of this friend group since our first year of high school. When we joined the drama club, the third-years were overjoyed to gain as many as five new members. The very next day, those third-years acted like the club didn't exist.

It was apparent they hadn't been motivated in the first place, and

had decided to quit the moment the club had enough members to survive. There were no second-years in the club, so from that day on, I led the club as its head. I struggled to secure us a budget and a place to practice—just barely managing to put together the equipment and costumes we needed—and taught myself all about drama without being able to tell a soul.

My parents were against me putting so much time into something that had no effect on my grades, but I managed to convince them by promising my grades would not drop. Then I produced the numbers to prove it. I never had any time for romance, but that didn't matter. It was fun growing together and chasing our dream day by day—of winning a contest and creating the kind of play we'd love to see ourselves.

That was plenty for me. I was happy, and I didn't think I'd ever want anything else.

But love...

It was just as the myths said: a single drop of love was enough to poison the whole of paradise. I could understand now why that emotion, passed on to Adam and Eve, was referred to as a forbidden fruit.

"I wish I'd remained ignorant," I found myself murmuring.

My days working with the drama club towards our shared dream were fun, even when we did encounter the occasional setback. There must have been a universe out there where this LIME group and its lively conversations could last forever.

I hoped Ooboshi-kun was prepared.

In some small ways, my drama club and his 05th Floor Alliance were similar. Of course, I did realize how presumptuous it was to compare our club to the extraordinary talents of the Alliance. One similarity, I felt, ran deeper than the members themselves.

Today, when I touched him. At that very moment, I placed Ooboshi-kun under love's curse.

He would have been happy just to work towards the Alliance's goals. But now he knew there was another option. He was now fated to meet the same end as me, whenever that might come.

YAMADA: Come in, Midori-san! We've lost your transmission!

Shadow Drama Club Member A: The abyss of the night.
Taken by slumber.

Background NPC: You okay?

Why now?

I'd held it in in front of Ooboshi-kun. I'd held it in in the stall of

one of the hotel's bathrooms.

But now that I was reading the drama club's messages...

The dam broke, and everything I'd been keeping in came flooding out.

I was so lucky to go to a school like Kouzai where everybody was so well-behaved.



It was past lights out, and I knew none of these students would be out of bed now. There was no risk of any of them stumbling on me in this restroom. I could cry without fear of being heard. I was so lucky to be the only girl rebellious enough to be out of bed.

My phone kept on pinging with the familiar LIME trill as the club members sent message after anxious message. Their words disappeared beneath the fat teardrops that fell on the screen. I clung to my phone as though clinging onto the warmth of my friends and cried, no longer concerned with how late it was getting.

Epilogue: Iroha and her Coach

“Welp. Here I am...”

I was trembling. I’d just gotten off the shinkansen, and the massive glass-paneled station was right behind me now.

Oh, you’re wondering, just who was that *gorgeous* girl with the celebrity-grade sunglasses? The one in the cute, stylish outfit? The one with the huge suitcase like I was gonna be here for months? The one who looked like an overexcited tourist?

Well, it was me: Kohinata Iroha!

I was kind of nervous stepping foot on unfamiliar soil all by myself, but that barely mattered. I was here to meet a huge star! *And* she was gonna let me visit her movie set. It was a literal miracle that my heart hadn’t exploded yet!

It was right in the middle of a weekday, and I was sacrificing my attendance for this. A bold move, if I did think so myself. Really, it was Sasara’s fault. She was the one who encouraged me to go, regardless of the consequences. I was pretty sure she just wanted to get rid of me because I was getting on her nerves. I was gonna pester her a million times worse than usual when I got back! She’d better be ready for me! Hmph!

“This city looks more normal than I expected...”

Kyoto always made me think of old period dramas and geisha walking around, but honestly, it didn’t look too different from the city I lived in. Maybe the traditional tourist spots that Senpai and the others were visiting were the exceptions and not the rule.

“Senpai... I really can’t help but get my hopes up, huh? Like it’s gonna make a difference...” I didn’t come here to see him, but I couldn’t help but be overly aware that he was in this city too. Was that pathetic or what?

Kyoto was huge. The chances of bumping into him were the same as him getting a girlfriend out of nowhere.

By that, I mean there was zero chance.

...There was *zero* chance, right?

Like, there was no way Mashiro-senpai went all out and actually won him over, right? And there wasn’t some random dark horse that turned up out of the blue, decided she was gonna be a main character, and shot straight for his heart. *Right?*

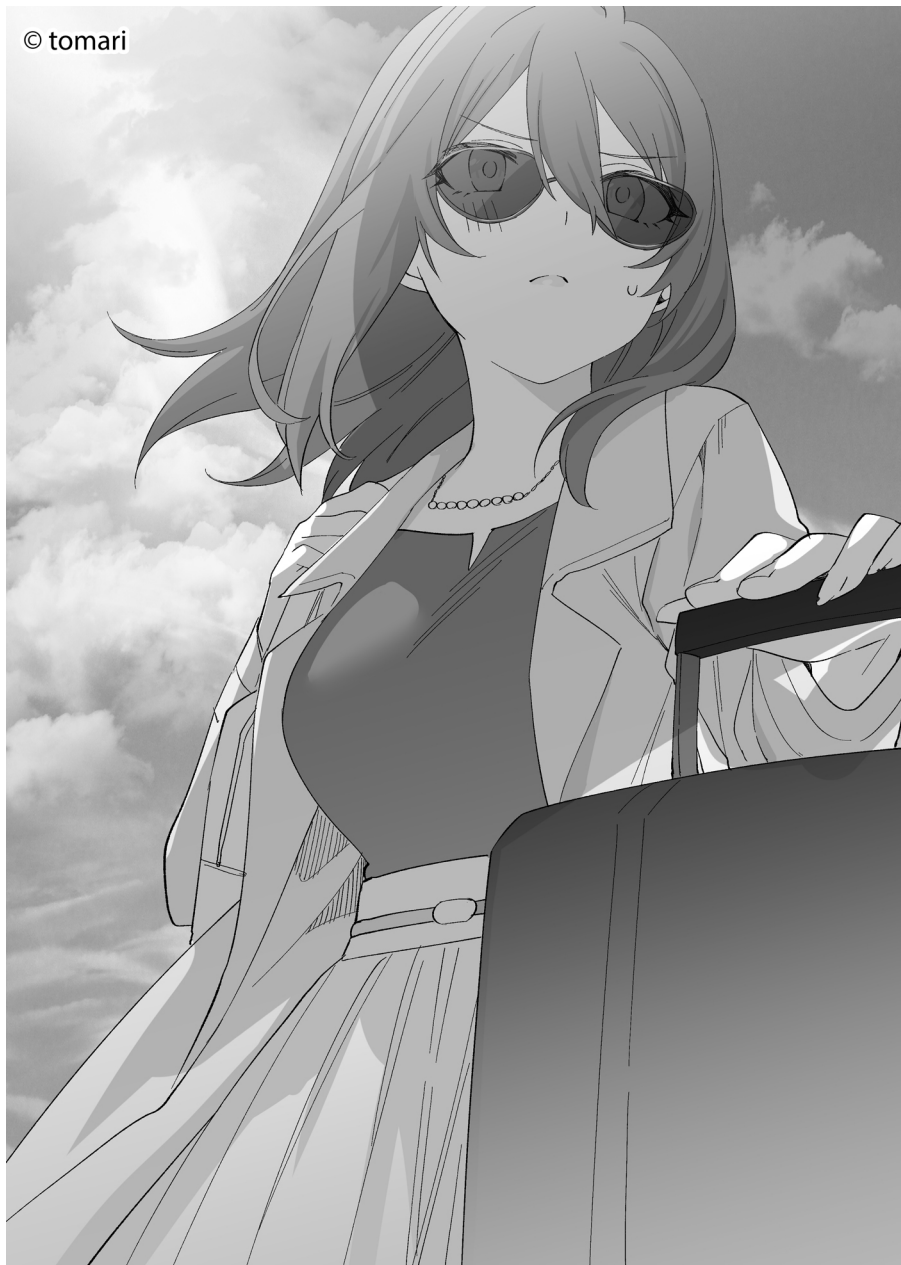
Ugh! Okay, okay, okay! I needed to stop obsessing over this

already!

I knocked myself on the head, trying to get rid of the anxious thoughts sticking to my infatuation.

“H-Hey... Look at that woman! She’s gorgeous!”

“Wow... She’s breathtaking. I wonder if she’s a celebrity.”



I could hear people start to talk around me. My brain recognized those stares as the same kind I got at school, and I instinctively stood up straighter.

A gorgeous woman who looked like a celebrity? There was only one girl around here who fit that description: me! I doubted there were gonna be many girls out there who were weird enough to dress like a celebrity on *purpose*.

People were looking at me expectantly. I wasn't gonna just stand there doing nothing. It wasn't a principle or anything; it was like a natural instinct of mine, something I'd learned over the course of my life.

"Wait. Something doesn't add up here."

I wasn't usually referred to as a "woman." Actually, I couldn't remember anyone ever calling me that. It was always "girl." The "gorgeous" part was something I got a lot, though.

Having said that, I was more cute than beautiful, not to mention an innocent teenager, which was probably why people tended to refer to me as a girl.

My doubts vanished instantly as I realized these people weren't actually looking at me at all.

"Bon day, Iroha-chan. It's a long time since we last met. Are you being well?"

There was a beautiful woman here. She was waving a refined hand and walking towards me in a way that was both graceful and sexy. It was her long, fluttering silver hair that gave me the idea to look for a nickname for her (I found "Silver Muse" online). This was Mashiro-senpai's mom, and the woman who might become my coach: Tsukinomori Mizuki-san.

There was a majesty in the way she walked, like the totally bare ground beneath her feet was laid with a red carpet. Her powerful presence caught the attention of all the people around her. Even though your average Japanese citizen wouldn't recognize her as a Broadway actress, they were able to pick up that she wasn't quite ordinary.

If that wasn't proof that she was a major star, I didn't know what was.

"It's been so long since I've seen you, I forgot how impressive you are, Mizuki-san," I said.

She laughed. "No worry. You are her daughter, Iroha-chan. You have potential forever."

"Huh?"

Why was she bringing up mom?

Speaking of, mom was away on business right now, and that made

it the perfect opportunity to sneak away, but maybe I wouldn't be able to fool her completely. It'd be one thing if I were just skipping school, but if she heard I was out visiting a film set, she would be *furious*, and maybe hurt too.

It was probably best not to think about it too much. At least right now.

But if mom was linked to my "potential," as Mizuki-san put it, then what if mom used to be an actress too?

"Yes. I can't win against her. Her bust size is like G-force. I am forever a loser."

"You were talking about my *chest*?!"

"What? That is wrong. You are looking at my chest when you talk."

"That's only because of our relative heights!" I sighed. I thought I'd figured something out.

"Iroha-chan?"

"Oh, um. Yes?"

Mizuki-san brought a gentle hand down on my head and smiled at me meaningfully. I couldn't tell what she was smiling about exactly, but I did know that I found it super encouraging.

"We go now. I will show you the world for you."

"Okay. Thank you so much for this!"

Mizuki-san turned around and started walking with just as much dignity as before. I scurried on after her. I glanced at my feet; there was no imaginary red carpet for me. But as long as I followed in this woman's footsteps, I knew I'd find what I needed. Mashiro-senpai and Sumire-chan-sensei were also growing and developing. Then there were Senpai and Ozuma, working towards their personal growth through the trial-and-error experiments they conducted to improve *Koyagi: When They Cry*.

I couldn't be the only one staying in the same spot and relying on everyone else to carry me.

Wait for me, Senpai.

I was going to find my best formula for growth so that I had even more to offer the Alliance!

Epilogue 2: Meeting with the CEO

“Now this is worth writing home about. You don’t usually call me, Mashiro.”

“I do call you sometimes.”

“You’re on your class trip, right? Are you missing daddy’s love?”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Hey, hey, wait a second my sweet, precious daughter. You can’t be so cold when you were the one who called me!”

It was late at night. I was at our hotel, making a call among the vending machines and ashtrays in the small rest area. It was past lights-out and the teachers had finished their patrols, so there was no one around in the corridor. I was probably the only one rebellious enough to still be awake. My earphones were hooked up to my phone, and through them came the annoying, familiar voice of my dad: Tsukinomori Makoto.

No, I needed to snap out of that mindset for what I was about to ask him.

He wasn’t “dad.” He was “Tsukinomori-san.”

I took a deep breath to clear my mind. Then, I spoke the line I’d thoughtfully prepared into my earphone’s mic.

“Dad— Um, Tsukinomori-san. I have a favor to ask.”

“Ah. A favor as CEO of Honeyplace Works, and not as your dad? Okay, spit it out.”

“Let me break up with Aki.”

“What?”

He sounded completely confused, repeating my request back to me. I knew he had mountains of romantic experience, so I was sure he’d understand how I felt about Aki. It was no wonder that my words took him by surprise.

“Did you two have a falling-out? Or did he mess up in some way?”

“Neither. It’s me. I don’t need him any more. I can fight by myself, without using Aki as a shield.” I paused. “I’m not the same Mashiro who only ever got depressed and mopey from being bullied.”

“And that’s why you want to end your fake relationship?”

“Yes. I’m happy just being his classmate from now on. His cousin.”

Tsukinomori-san fell silent. Even if he didn’t say anything, I could kind of guess how he was feeling. In the silence on the other side of the phone, I heard the slightest hint of his vocal cords vibrating.

The quiet lasted a little longer. Until...

"I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"Trauma is something that can jump up again at any time. You might just feel okay right now because you're in a period of low stress. Y'know, Mashiro, I love to take major gambles when it comes to work. If we stay in the black, great! But even if we go down to the red, there's excitement in treading new ground. And when a risk like that gets you to a smash hit game, there's no greater thrill!"

He spoke rapidly, like a deadbeat adult who did nothing but chase cheap pleasures all day. The only difference was the game he was addicted to. It wasn't the races or pachinko, but business management. After spewing his frightening nonsense, Tsukinomori-san lowered his voice. *"What I won't gamble on is my daughter's life."*

"I understand. I know why you had me transfer schools, and I know you're worried about me. It's just..." I thought back to the strength Midori-san had displayed. I really did love Aki. So if I couldn't even persuade my dad to do the right thing, what hope was there for me? "I'm not the same Mashiro I used to be. Going on this class trip has taught me that."

"Mashiro..."

"There are girls here who remind me of my old bullies. Girls who tease me, no matter the situation, just because they think it's funny." I swallowed. "The old me wouldn't be able to take it. I would have run away."

"Yeah, that's right, and that's exactly why I asked Akiteru-kun to—"

"I used to be like that because I was weak. I'm not anymore. I can look those girls right in the eye and talk to them."

"Let's say you're being totally honest with me right now. That doesn't mean you've gotta split up with Akiteru-kun, does it?"

"His relationship with me is stopping him from following his heart. I want you to set his heart free."

"I see... You're making this crazy request of me because you want to date him for real, is that right?"

"It's not just that."

"No?"

Though he prompted me, I didn't really have a logical reason for this; not one that anyone else could understand. I just felt like it was something I needed to do. I saw Midori-san's resolve, and it made me realize that I couldn't just be satisfied with this fake relationship anymore.

This situation would have been difficult enough as it was, even with Iroha-chan as my only rival, but there were lots of impressive girls in Aki's vicinity. I couldn't just stay in the safety of our fake

relationship sitting on my laurels and feeding off a happiness that wasn't even real.

A little while ago, I accidentally overheard Midori-san crying in the bathroom when I was walking around for a place I could call Tsukinomori-san. She must have confessed to Aki—and been rejected. Midori-san had mustered up all that strength and resolve, and here I was in the comfy position of Aki's fake girlfriend.

But I didn't feel it fair to stay there, not if I really wanted to call myself Midori-san's friend. I had to do this. Otherwise, I wouldn't ever be able to look her in the eye again.

"I've decided that I have to do this. That's all."

"Hmm... Sounds like you've made up your mind. Honestly, I don't know where you get that stubbornness from." Tsukinomori-san sighed. *"You haven't forgotten, have you, Mashiro? Your relationship is part of my contract with Akiteru-kun. It's the other half of the deal to accept the 05th Floor Alliance into Honeyplace Works. If I allow you to cut off the relationship, I'll need something in exchange to still make this worth it for me."*

There was his comeback. I'd been expecting it.

Aki really was amazing, being able to strike a deal on equal terms with the CEO of a leading company. He'd put his heart and soul into this, all for the sake of his teammates. For Iroha-chan, for OZ, for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei...

Now it was my turn.

"You can have Makigai Namako's representative work: *Snow White's Revenge Classroom*."

I presented my preprepared offer.

"What?!"

"I'll talk to Canary-san and get her to assign Honeyplace Works as the lead manager in getting the book turned into an anime and a video game."

Was it arrogant to bring such a proposal to a company as huge as Honeyplace Works? Even if it was, I knew that Makigai Namako was big enough to warrant it. He was a breakout light novel author who took the stage with a striking debut after his work won first prize at UZA Bunko's amateur writing award three years ago. That work then became a hit series that sold over three million cumulative copies.

His work was praised for its impressive display of seafood-related knowledge, its satirical prose, and its revolutionary take on peer pressure and the bounds of normalcy. And all of it was presented in a style that gave an exhilarating perspective via the eyes of the series's unique main character.

Even after producing such a well-received series, however, the author never showed any interest in adaptations of any kind, be they

manga, anime, or live-action,. He continually denied any requests that came to him. This did nothing to deter the many companies out there from trying again and again to negotiate what they saw as a valuable business opportunity.

"I know that there are hardly any works out there without adaptations that managed to get this successful in such a short period of time. It's got the potential to become just as successful as Imperial Books' *Internet Swordsmanship* and *Unemployed Transmigration*. Both those titles are well-known in the gaming world too."

"Those aren't as impressive as you're making out. The most they did was raise the market value of our competitor, Bowdai Games, and put smiles on the faces of its stockholders."

"I get that. That's why investors are so eager to see which company'll get involved in adapting *Snow White*." Tsukunomori-san didn't say anything, so I continued. "Honeyplace itself has been trying to negotiate the rights, hasn't it? I know you've had several meetings with Canary-san."

Tsukunomori-san paused. *"I even gatecrashed her villa the last time around. She still held her ground."*

"I was scared of it becoming too big; of getting too famous. I knew there were so many out there: UZA Bunko and other adults who all wanted a piece of the pie, but I've kept running from them. Now, though...I've decided not to run away anymore."

"You shouldn't underestimate what these adults are capable of, Mashiro. Getting your work adapted into other media'll be a great thing for you. Enough that adding the condition of hiring the Alliance would tip the balance of this deal in your favor."

"I see; negotiations have begun. But you should know that I have you in checkmate, Tsukunomori-san."

"What?"

"I have the contact details of Tenchido's CEO. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Wait, are you threatening me?"

His reaction confirmed my trump card's power. It was a good thing I did all that research before stepping up to the negotiating table. Knowing your opponent's weaknesses, desires, and current situation could really play to your advantage. That was something I'd learned through my argument with Midori-san.

Honeyplace Works and Tenchido were the biggest entertainment companies in Japan, representing the east and west of the country respectively. They held a friendly rivalry and worked together to maintain a perfect power balance between them. Yet that rivalry was deeper than two students competing over test scores, and more complex than a childish battle over sales numbers. They fought

against a backdrop of something much more serious.

Aki said that lately, the number of console games taking the world by storm had increased. Making games of that quality to meet the demand meant a climbing budget year-on-year, and it was getting ever more difficult to earn success with a game that wasn't polished to perfection.

With that in mind, what exactly was going on behind the scenes within the industry?

The answer was a fight over talent.

Keeping up massive sales and staying at the top of the market was vital to attract talented personnel. For somebody hoping to be paid well while helping develop a game that countless people would enjoy, the most attractive companies were those with good future prospects.

"If you let this valuable chance slip away and Makigai Namako sides with Tenchido, the power balance you've created is at risk of crumbling. If you're not bothered about that, then neither am I."

"You really think a single IP holds that much influence?"

"It wouldn't be enough to tank you, no, but I also don't think the damage will be small enough for you to just ignore. There are lots of companies out there that collapsed because of a tiny error in judgment. You're a top CEO, and the IP you're after is about to be snatched up by your biggest rival. If it's that minor a thing to you, then feel free to turn me down."

"Jeez. I thought you were a creative type, not a businesswoman. I don't know where you get it from. I really don't." Though I couldn't see him, I had no trouble imagining him twiddling his well-kept mustache thoughtfully on the other side of the phone. After a split second's silence, he let out a deep sigh. *"You got me, Mashiro. I give in. I will alter the conditions surrounding the contract, as you wish."*

"I did it! I really did it!" I whispered gleefully while gasping for breath on the bench in the rest area.

This was the first time I'd ever used Makigai Namako to force someone's hand like this, and I knew it wasn't exactly noble. But neither did I think it was a bad thing to use all the tools in my arsenal and my own effort to bring about the results I wanted.

The fake relationship was off, and now the playing field was perfectly even. Now that Aki wasn't bound by that contract anymore, fate would unfurl faster than anybody was anticipating. With Iroha-chan out of the way, I was determined to win over Aki's heart in these last days of our class trip.

"Tomorrow's day three. A day of total freedom where we don't even have to stay in our groups." I picked up my phone—it was a little

warm from the call I'd just made—and this time, opened LIME. I tapped to call Amachi Otoha. "Hello? Is this Otoha-san? Um, I wanted to ask about that invitation to come and see Tenchido's headquarters..."

Honeyplace Works. Tenchido. It didn't matter. I'd use everything at my disposal to win Aki's heart.

"I'll come by tomorrow. And I'll bring Aki with me."



Afterword

Hello, readers across the land. Thank you so much for enjoying *ImoUza*, or *My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me*. This is author mikawaghost. Did you enjoy the class trip from hell, complete with no Iroha?

This volume is being published in the current year, 2021, and I think there are probably some of you in junior high or high school who haven't been able to go on your class trip or properly visit certain places you were looking forward to because of the coronavirus. Though that didn't exactly influence this volume directly, I did try to describe the sights of Kyoto as succinctly as possible, so that you could enjoy a simulated experience of going on this class trip with our cast.

To sum it up, the class trip is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that you never forget. That girl who acts one way in the classroom might be a lot more lax out and about, and you get to share a special time with that one person you admire...

I never got to experience anything like that, though—my high school was an all boys' school. Ha ha ha.

But anyway, please enjoy this class trip packed with laughs, tears, excitement, Midori, heartbreak, flirting, and teasing. I wish I'd gotten to go on a trip like that too...but don't worry, because I'm definitely not crying!

Now for the acknowledgments:

To my illustrator, Tomari-sensei. Thank you for your consistently awesome illustrations! You always make the characters look so cute and wonderful, but at the same time so convincing. I look forward to seeing the new pictures every time. I'm looking forward to our continued work together.

To mangaka Hiraoka Hira-sensei, who is in charge of the *ImoUza* manga. I was already really enjoying the manga, but I'm enjoying it even more now that Midori, Otoi-san, and other characters are starting to show up. Midori looks incredible, and just as airheaded as I always imagined her. If anyone reading the light novel hasn't read the manga yet, please do—it's amazing.

And to my editor, Nuru-san, and the editorial department, and everyone else at GA Bunko, I'm sorry I always run so close to my deadlines. I want to make this clear: it's not because I'm slacking. I'm just being faithful to the saying (that I just made up): "High-quality

manuscripts lie within high-quality recreation.” I’m simply living each day with the purpose of improving my work. What do you mean, “that just sounds like an excuse”? All right, I’m sorry! (Genuinely!)

The final acknowledgment goes, of course, to all of my readers! I can’t thank you enough for sticking with this series all the way to volume eight. I would be very grateful for your continued support from now on too—the rest of the series is only going to get more exciting as we wait for the anime!

That’s all from me,
mikawaghost

My Friend's
Little Sister
Has It **IN** for Me!

vol. **8**

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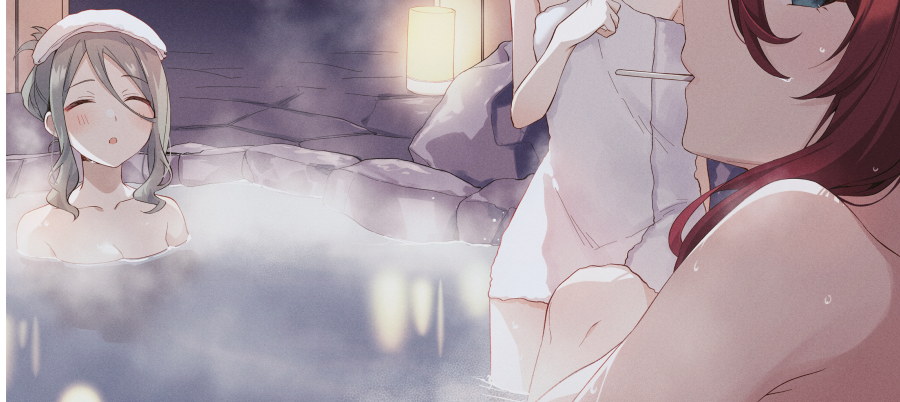


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I'll want to look back on
these photos, even ten
years down the line.

The Class Trip to Kyoto Is Here!

Tensions run high
between the girls
when they talk
love at the onsen.





“Let’s
go!”

“If you and
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then there’s no
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we shouldn’t go
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is there?”

An unexpected event brings the two closer.
Kageishi Midori gets ready to put up a real fight.

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My
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Little
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vol. 8

Has It
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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 8

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NIDAKE UZAI Vol. 8

by mikawaghost

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